“Setting the Stage”:

Theatricality in *Gone Girl* (2012) and *10:04* (2014)

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Abstract

This thesis problematizes the long-standing incommensurability between theatricality and quotidian reality. I argue, instead, that theatrical processes are embedded in everyday life and I use literature to prove and contextualize my argument. Although most theorists eliminate textuality from the meaning of theatricality, I contend that text becomes a productive space with which to examine theatrical processes. In this thesis, I intend to formulate my approach and demonstrate its validity in conducting literary analysis. Focusing on two contemporary novels, Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), I articulate two different modes of theatricality by placing them against the neoliberal backdrop. In *Gone Girl*, theatricality conduces to the protagonists' entrapment in neoliberal practices. *10:04*, by contrast, seeks to reclaim the theatrical potential as a way of forming a community. I conclude that these novels expose the cultural structure of social life as theatrical, textual, and (self-) reflective, and, concurrently, challenge the claim that theatricality has an intrinsically moral meaning.

Résumé

Cette thèse problématise l'incommensurabilité de longue date, entre la théâtralité et la réalité quotidienne. J'affirme plutôt que les processus théâtraux sont enfoncés dans la vie quotidienne et j'utilise la littérature pour prouver et contextualiser mon argument. Bien que la plupart des théoriciens éliminent la textualité du sens de la théâtralité, je prétends que le texte devient un espace productif avec lequel on examine les processus théâtraux. Dans cette thèse, j'ai l'intention de formuler mon approche et de démontrer sa validité dans la conduite de l'analyse littéraire. En s'axant sur les deux romans contemporains, *Gone Girl* (2012) de Gillian Flynn et *10:04* (2014) de Ben Lerner, j'articule deux modes de théâtralité différents en les plaçant dans le contexte néolibéral. Dans le *Gone Girl*, la théâtralité conduit à l'emprisonnement des protagonistes dans les pratiques néolibérales. Le *10:04*, par contre, cherche à récupérer le potentiel théâtral comme un moyen de former une communauté. Je conclus que ces romans révèlent le contexte culturel contemporain de la vie sociále - théâtral, textuel et (auto-) réfléchi - et, simultanément, ils remettent en question l'idée que la théâtralité a une signification intrinsèquement morale.

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Introduction

If, as performance theorist Richard Schechner argues, individuals "as never before live by means of performance" (28), then the twenty-first century demonstrates the extent to which the quotidian has merged with the theatrical. In everyday interactions, ranging from workplace enterprises to intimate processes like dating, individuals present and sustain different versions of their selves as an attempt to showcase their most alluring traits. New media and platforms for digital communication such as Facebook and Twitter have made the drama of self-staging especially pronounced. Expanded virtual networks allow individuals to display "multiple voices … of [their] own personality" by permitting "access to multiple audiences" (Papacharissi 4). This online culture of self-display encourages online users to engage in both textual and visual performances. The intensifying imperative of self-styling is, nevertheless, tied to broader sociological claims, made by theorists such as Erving Goffman, that the public sphere of everyday life has always been wrapped in the performative. Goffman, in particular, outlined the "infrastructural nature of performance" in everyday interactions (Loxley 155). The intensified self-styling encouraged by virtual networks has served to make Goffman's twentieth-century claims even more pertinent in the present day.

In this thesis, I will examine representations of "the infrastructural nature of performance" in society in two prominent twenty-first-century literary texts. Although theorists have mainly employed theatricality to examine Renaissance,[1] eighteenth,[2] and nineteenth century[3] texts, I intend to prove that theatricality is a useful and valid concept with

[1] John Bernard, "Theatricality and Textuality: The example of 'Othello.'" *New Literary History*, vol.26, no. 3, 1995, pp. 931-949.

[2] David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot*. Columbia University Press, 1986.

[3] Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*. University of California Press, 1992.

which to analyze contemporary literature. Despite the fact that "performativity" and "performance theory" are terms that are currently in vogue in literary criticism, in this study I will use the term theatricality. Both *performativity* and *performance theory* place less emphasis on the text and almost discount the dimension of narrative. Despite enabling a project of political significance,[4] the term *performance* emerged as an attempt to distinguish specific "processes of performing from the products of theatrical performance" (Reinelt 201). Historically, *performance* has also been correlated with anti-theatrical practices that dismissed "aspects of traditional theater practice[s] that emphasized plot, character, and referentiality" (Reinelt 202). Whilst *performativity* signifies an often unintentional process due to its use as "a unifying idea for cultural and social behavior" (Davis and Postlewait 31), *theatricality* connotes an awareness of its own staged quality. In my analysis, I shall address the aspects of performance and audience that are fundamental in both *theatricality* and *performativity* alike, but the main difference between the two terms is self-consciousness that theatricality signals.

In this introduction, I will provide the theoretical background that will inform the rest of this study. First, I seek to define the multifaceted terms and concepts that "theatricality" encompasses. The term has received a large amount of attention from scholars and philosophers and it remains a contentious idea that is slippery to define. Second, I stress the uniquely contemporary sociopolitical backdrop of neoliberalism with which certain twenty-first-century authors contend. Meeting the demands of the market or shunning them is a concern ever present for contemporary authors. These tensions are often reflected in the acts and narratives that characters experience in the novels themselves. I will then demonstrate my

[4] Janelle Reinelt claims that *performance*'s political project collapsed the boundaries between "elite and popular" culture and established an approach based on the "sociopolitical analyses of the operations of these performances" (202). This project foregrounds "cultural differences and historical specificities," leading theorists to "produc[e] work on race, gender, and sexuality as they are asserted and inscribed in performance" (Reinelt 202).

approach through a close reading of two pieces of contemporary fiction: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014).

Definitions in Theatricality

Starting from its conflation with mimesis, theatricality came to be associated with artificiality, functioning in opposition to reality (Davis and Postlewait 4). The term was later interrelated with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, [5] implying "the commensurability of life and the stage" (Davis and Postlewait 7-8). A bifurcated meaning of theatricality emerged, denoting both a system that is restricted to theater alone and a theoretical concept "abstracted from the theater itself" (Davis and Postlewait 1). I use theatricality according to the second definition, examining situations of everyday life rather than events limited to the stage. In this manner, theatricality is taken to denote the individuals' (self-)awareness that everyday reality can be seen through the lens of theater.

To explicate my definition of theatricality, I use the two photographs from Henri Cartier-Bresson's diptych that Ben Lerner includes in *10:04*. With this piece of art, Lerner paradoxically displays the differences between "our world" and "the world to come" in two identical frames.

[5] The *theatrum mundi* metaphor describes the world as a universal stage in which human beings become actors. Life is paralleled to a "play scripted and directed by a mighty producer," may that be "God, Fortune [or] Fate" (Hoffmeister). This superior being assigns particular roles to the participants and determines their actions.

Extrapolating from the logic of his novel, I use the photographs, in turn, to indicate the difference between reality "as it is" in the first picture and reality seen through the lens of theatricality in the second picture. Although there is no material or physical difference between the photographs, the viewer's perception radically changes when the frame is seen through the metaphor of theater. In the first photograph, the world depicts a man against the background of the Brooklyn Bridge. Applying a theatrical lens in the second photograph, the world *is* and *is not* the same as the one portrayed in the first picture. Theatricality reconfigures the background as a theatrical setting and transforms the man into an actor. This creates a fundamental self-awareness in the actor himself and the viewers. Therefore, the change pertains to the *perception* that reality becomes theatrical rather than an *ontological change* in reality itself. Thus, what defines theatricality is self-awareness of the metaphor of theater, both in the performance by the actor and the observation by an audience.

This model of theatricality is similar to Josette Féral's understanding that the space of theatricality "requires both the gaze of the spectator and the act of the other," because it is essentially "a dynamic of perception" between the audience and actor (207). Although art critics have decried theatricality's interactive dimension with reference to artworks,[6] I focus on the self-consciousness of the audience's gaze stripped from any aesthetic judgments. Whilst for Féral it is the audience that primarily creates the theatrical space through observation, Victor Turner argues that the performer creates the reflective potential in the process of theatricality. Turner uses the concept of *homo performans*: that is, "if man is a sapient animal, a tool making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, Homo performans" (Turner 12). As a "self-performing animal," individual human "performances are, in a way, reflexive, [because] in performing he reveals himself to himself" (Turner 13). This gives the potential not only for self-awareness, but also for awareness on the part of the audience, as "human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating" (Turner 13).

Similarly, Erica Fischer Lichte contends that theater purposefully gives a glimpse of the "very process of construction and the conditions underlying it," granting an awareness to the audience and initiating a process of reflection (Reinelt 208). Through these discourses of awareness and reflectivity, theater becomes a "field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for and the possibilities of constructing reality" in contrast to quotidian reality (Reinelt 208). As I argue, however, the novels I examine negotiate this possibility of

[6] In examining artworks in relation to the mode of interaction with an audience, Michael Fried makes a distinction between the concepts of *theatricality* and *absorption*. According to Fried, an artwork attains a theatrical quality when it recognizes the existence of a beholder, in other words, when it addresses an audience. Consequently, this work of art ceases to be a self-enclosed entity because it invites a participatory dynamic, a quality that Fried largely dismisses in artworks. *Theatricality*, thus, becomes art's greatest shortcoming (Fried 101). In the opposite edge of the spectrum lies the concept of *absorption*. Fried extols works of art in which the figures in the painting engage in solitary or self-absorbed activities, utterly disregarding the presence of an audience. This immersive activity is highly lauded because the painting maintains a distance from the viewer, implying that art belongs in an independent, self-contained realm.

alternative "constructions of reality" and a heightened perception of self-reflectivity in everyday life through social roles. Both *10:04* and *Gone Girl* dramatize everyday relationships as characters engage in a self-conscious role-play during their social interactions. This self-consciousness is amplified as they discuss and evaluate their own performances in a critical mode.

Since my study examines representations in literature, I shall include literary form in my analysis of theatricality, arguing that the narrators' language functions as the primary means by which the characters perform their adopted social roles. Iterable structures highlight how repetition in performance becomes a part of the characters' reality. These iterable structures have been associated with "performative utterances" as defined by the philosopher J. L. Austin in his speech act theory (Loxley 13). The word performative in this context is differentiated from the adjectival form of performance, namely the state or quality of an act "by virtue of being a performance" (Loxley 140). Performatives, according to Austin's theory, are the words that enact the action they name and have a concrete impact on everyday life (2). The most well-know example is the case of the marital "I do" in which the act of marriage is realized the very instant the phrase is uttered. Although for Austin "reproducibility is an essential feature of language," he made a distinction between real utterances and literary or "non-serious" utterances that are parasitic to the real (Loxley 13, 3). However, Jacques Derrida noticed a basic incongruity in Austin's theory. In accepting that all utterances are reproducible, the very distinction between real and parasitic is negated because of the lack of a pure or real form. The concept of the "non-serious" performative became for Derrida "a gap" or a "fissure that threatened the coherence and pretensions of the whole enterprise" (Loxley 63). Derrida extended the idea of iterability from performatives to a feature of linguistic speech in general (Loxley 77). For Derrida, this reiterative nature of language makes the "contamination of … the serious with the feigned" inherent and,

therefore, these strict demarcations dissolve into a "hapless indeterminacy" (Loxley 84). The iterable structure of language gestures towards the repetitive nature of life and dismantles the idea that performance can be contrasted to an offstage real life.

My argument brings together two distinct theorizations of theatricality. On the one hand, theatricality has been theorized as a break or an opening in everyday life. Féral contends that theatricality "emerges through a cleft in quotidian space" (97). This cleft can be created either through an actor or through the gaze of an audience that reconfigures the space of quotidian reality as theatrical (97). In this manner, theatricality retains its status as (a form of) alterity that is disparate from reality. On the other hand, theatricality has been conceived as part of reality, as "connected to" or even "embedded within social life, beyond the domains of theatrical performance" (Davis and Postlewait 28). This conflation of the artistic/aesthetic and the social in everyday life becomes evident in role-playing, exemplified in Erving Goffman's sociological theory of dramaturgy, and rituals, such as Victor Turner's anthropological analyses, revealing social life's performative structure (Davis and Postlewait 29). Theatricality in *Gone Girl* and *10:04* begins as a breach in everyday life – because of the performances' overly staged quality – but eventually proves to be embedded in it.

Social Roles

As I am dealing with social roles, I draw significantly from the premises of the sociological theory of dramaturgy, which emphasizes the necessarily performative qualities of social interaction. Stemming from a social and psychological theoretical foundation, dramaturgical theory focuses on "the expressive/impressive dimension of human activity" (Brissett and Edgley 3). The theory is based on Erving Goffman's seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), in which Goffman employs theatrical language

as a medium for his social analysis. He considers life as a "dramatically enacted thing" in which individuals engage in role-playing activities as part of quotidian interaction. Individuals convey particular intentions to an audience either intentionally or subconsciously (Goffman 72-75). Goffman claims that individuals are inclined to "control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of [them]" by defining the contours of "the situation which the others come to formulate" (3-4). They engage, therefore, in processes of impression management in their self-presentation through dramaturgical practices such as performance (Goffman 65). At the same time, Goffman uses the theatrical notion of "front" and "back" regions, which mirror the onstage and backstage. The front region is associated with the place in which self-presentation is performed, hence the front region requires an audience. By contrast, the back region does not expect an audience because it marks the space where the performer relaxes. Goffman also discusses the fronts or the "expressive equipment" that people employ when effectively on stage (22).

The concepts of acting and impression management created the main misconception about dramaturgy because they raised the implication that individuals are inauthentic or withhold their true selves. Nonetheless, Goffman orients his definition of performance towards the axis of action and impression rather than the counterfeit that veils the "real." Performance, for Goffman, is the participant's "activity … which serves to influence in any way ... other participants" (15). Individuals may use personal fronts to achieve their purpose in the interaction process, but Goffman underscores that these performances are not "acted" or "put on" like imposed masks (73).

In contrast, the IM or Impression Management tradition emphasizes self-presentation practices as strategic and manipulative. Although Goffman's work influences IM theory, the presented self in IM becomes an active manipulator of the situation. Contrary to Goffman

who underlines that the self is solely "partitioned in terms of self-presentations before a variety of audiences" (Chriss 67), IM argues for a calculated manipulation of the audience. The actor withholds the truth because the process of interaction "is not an end in itself but a means to an end of gaining benefits" (Chriss 67). The actor "has a hidden agenda as he or she goes about the business of presenting the self' because of the "overt attempt to keep a private reality from surfacing during the commissioning of any particular public presentation" (Chriss 67). Tseelon exemplifies the distinction between Goffman and IM as a game of "representation" in Goffman's theory, because individuals negotiate their presentations, and "misrepresentation" in IM, as participants "present various images of themselves as a strategic move" (Chriss 67). In the novels analyzed in this study, I argue that Ben, the main character in *10:04*, complies with self-presentation as defined by Goffman's theory. In contrast, I contend that Amy and Nick, the main characters in *Gone Girl*, actively embody the tenets of IM theory.

The concept of performance that I examine is related to social roles and the way in which individuals manipulate or play with them. In sociology, functionalist role theory stresses the fact that the roles are fixed by society (Chriss 70). In contrast, the phenomenological approach supports that individuals experience their social roles "subjectively" (Chriss 69). The phenomenological understanding of the world, influenced by Husserl, focuses on an attempt to "suspend belief in the taken-for-granted objective world" focusing on "the social world as it exists, in the here and now" (Chriss 69). This extends to the roles "as they are experienced and interpreted by actors in the everyday lifeworld" (Chriss 69). Goffman made the "concept of role more malleable" in order to emphasize and leave more room for "the agentic nature of roles and role performance under analytically certifiable conditions" (Chriss 71). Goffman defines social roles as "the enactment of … duties attached to a given status" (15). Nonetheless, the "status" or "position" is not material or tangible "to

be possessed and displayed but enacted, portrayed" (Goffman 75). Goffman acknowledges the existence of a structure or a "collective representation" as a result of the institutionalization of fronts (27). However, these fronts and roles are not fixed concepts enforced onto individuals (Brissett and Edgley 29). Individuals do not merely "perform preconceived roles" like actors on the stage, but they have the freedom to manipulate and play with them (Brissett and Edgley 29). In this way, dramaturgy balances the perennial sociological anxiety between agency and structure.

Correspondingly, Goffman places emphasis on the concept of "face" in a social interaction. He associates face with one's expressive effort to be compatible with the position or viewpoint one has presented before an audience. The presented image, though, is forged according to "approved social attributes" because faces are highly institutionalized (Goffman 5, 7). Goffman sees face as the "positive social value" that a person "claims for himself" or herself (5). But, crucially enough, the individual needs to communicate it in order for an interlocutor to read and assess it, because the face "becomes manifest only when these events are … interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them" (7). Thus, the face is not something "lodged in or on [the] body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter" (7). According to Goffman, one is "said to *have*, or *be in*, or *maintain* face when … [one] effectively … presents an image of [oneself] that is internally consistent, [and] is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants" (6). Consequently, in order for a person to "maintain face" in a certain activity, one ought to take into account one's position in society (7). I will demonstrate that all three protagonists in *10:04* and *Gone Girl* need to *be in* face and at the same time *maintain* it to sustain an image consistent with their roles.

I employ Goffman's concept of role distance to accentuate the theatrical dimension of social roles and the characters' performances. Goffman defines role distance as a separation from the role that is incarnated (103). This "wedge between the individual and his role" might be "intentional or unintentional, sincere or affected" (Goffman 103), but more importantly, role distance can potentially entail a breakdown of the social system. For Goffman, the dramatized self is realized through action to the extent that "doing" becomes "being" (102). Since acts are conflated with the role, the individual must "keep command of himself" bodily and in terms of "receiving and transmitting communications," otherwise, a disruption in the act will entail a separation with the role, leading to the disintegration of "the system" (Goffman 101). This is also based on the audience's evaluation because the actors need the presence of a spectator to assess the "attachment to [the] particular role" (Goffman 103). In my analysis of role distance, I use Chriss's distinction between "euphoric" and "dysphoric role distance" (76). As I will argue, Ben's self-presentation in *10:04* is structured around dysphoric role distance, especially through the parody of the self and his roles. I base my argument on Chriss's contention that a particular aspect of "dysphoric role distancing" includes "playful self-parody of the self," which comes to be recognized through "overemphasis or exaggeration" (76). In addition, I contend that Amy and Nick's role distance in *Gone Girl* becomes euphoric because their performance becomes a means of asserting dominance in the relationship.

Audience and (Self-)Reflectivity

Along with the external audience, I examine the concept of the self as an audience or what Bruce Wilshire calls "myself-as-audience" (201). Wilshire argues that a glaring omission on Goffman's part is "the self-conscious structure of the self" that posits the self as an audience in the presentation (201). He claims that "I become the primary audience of my

roles," because the only person who is "abidingly present" in all the roles is essentially "myself" (Wilshire 201). Wilshire emphasizes the individual's "consciousness-of-roles," either "actual" or "possible," which creates a "meta-role" that evaluates the performances (201). The self, thus, becomes both an audience and an evaluator of the performances. Besides, the concept of the "retrospective act" constitutes a primary way in which "the self is dramaturgically transformed" (Brissett and Edgley 21). The term "retrospective act," first introduced by George Herbert Mead, indicates the process through which individuals become the "audience to their own [past] behaviour" to evaluate and reflect upon their actions (Brissett and Edgley 21).

In contemporary literature, aesthetic processes of self-reflectivity are correlated with sociological and cultural changes. Self-reflection characterizes the novel thematically and formally since its inception. However, modernism succeeded in making it a defining feature of a movement as resistance to the bourgeois norms (Barth 199). After 1945, a broader "social dynamic of self-observation" diminished its revolutionary potential and made it a normative practice both in the perception of selfhood and as a literary aesthetic. Individuals start engaging in "self-monitoring" processes as they consider "themselves to be living, not lives simply, but *life stories* of which they are the protagonists" (McGurl 12). Mark McGurl claims that this self-monitoring has become a formal tendency in postwar literature (12). As performers adopt different "characters" and engage in various performances of the self, their effort to place the various performances "into a coherent narrative of the self" is further complicated (Papacharissi 4) To accommodate the "mutable self that emerges," individuals

employ "[s]elf-monitoring" practices, moving from the "stability of the self (self as object) to change of the self (self as process)" (Papacharissi 4).[7]

Narratives and Textuality

Apart from the bodily self-presentations in social interactions, I also examine selfhood as constructed and displayed discursively through narratives, because the individuals engage in storytelling practices as a means of developing their social roles. The characters in both novels feel the tension between institutional demand and the individuals' freedom to compose their own narratives (Holstein and Gubrium 107). This informs my argument that the narrators in the novels construct their selves discursively as they (re)write their lives. As I will argue, *10:04*'s Ben writes his identity by virtue of being the main character and the novel's self-conscious author at the same time. Similarly, *Gone Girl*'s Amy rewrites her identity through a fake diary. In addition, I suggest that the novels stress the indistinguishability of the real and the fictional because fiction comes to essentially structure the protagonists' lives. In his interview on the *Believer*, Ben Lerner intimates that he intends to demonstrate "how we live fictions, how fictions have real effects, become facts in that sense, and how our experience of the world changes depending on its arrangement into one narrative or another" (*Believer*). Similarly, in *Gone Girl*, the protagonist seeks to apply the idealized dimension of stories in her life.

[7] Papacharissi and McGurl attribute this phenomenon to the period of reflexive modernity, mainly discussed by sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. According to theorists of reflexive modernity, modernity as a historical category has not been superseded by a radically new social order. Rather, social developments have solely entailed the transition to another form of modernity. This argument contradicts the theory of postmodernity because it posits that the period following modernity is not radically severed from modernity itself. The initial theory on high modernity put forth by Antony Giddens has been expounded by Ulrich Beck. For Beck, the process of reflexive modernization takes place through the deconstruction of older forms and the attendant reconstruction by employing similar modern social forms. The new social order, therefore, builds on the tenets of modernity (Beck 2).

The process of "storying" testifies to the affinity between theatricality and textuality. Although in my thesis I consider textuality's important role in theatricality, theorists such as Roland Barthes have argued in favor of the text's reduced role. Barthes, for instance, defines theatricality as "theater-minus-text," as "a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument" (26). In other words, the written word may be the springboard to the theatrical, but the theatrical attains its full form onstage, through embodied exchanges. By examining theatricality in literary texts, I intend to emphasize the social commentary that can be offered through language.

The traits of an individual in the contemporary cultural context intertwine theatricality and textuality. Mark McGurl claims that such an individual is bound to "feel a 'compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging' of a biography and, indeed, for the obsessive 'reading' of that biography even as it's being written" (12-13). This process reveals the interweaving of theatricality and textuality because the individual is first and foremost a creative laborer in which the roles of worker ("manufacture"), artist ("design"), and director ("staging") are conflated. At the same time, the subject is a creator through language – by discursively creating his/her life or bios – and an observer of this life. An individual, therefore, attends to processes of self-creation – by virtue of performing and writing – and introspection. Theatricality, textuality, and introspection define not only the contemporary social and cultural context but the qualities of the people living in it. Theatricality, therefore, becomes a fitting framework for the analysis of contemporary literature. In addition, this process of writing and reading simultaneously, encapsulates the way in which scholars examine the contemporary as a reflexive historical category (Martin 228).

Theatricality as an approach can also be conducive to the eradication of the real/sincere or artificial/theatrical binary that still prevails in academic discussions on contemporary literature. Discussions of the periodization of the contemporary, namely its

historical situatedness as a new movement and its aesthetic uniqueness in relation to previous literary movements, retain similar distinctions. Contemporary American fiction is characterized by tentativeness both in name and periodization. [8] The most common starting point is the period following the postmodern movement, situated in the late 1980's (McLaughlin 212). The literary works of the postmodern movement have often been characterized as "ironic" because of the pervasiveness of artificiality at the expense of "reality," ideas concomitant with theories of post-structuralism. McLaughlin defines the literary movement of the contemporary as a new stream against postmodernism (McLaughlin 212). In an attempt to break away from the meaninglessness of the "postmodern impasse" (Huehls 32), contemporary fiction gave rise to "post-ironic fiction" marked by a turn to "history" and "sincerity" as well as connection and feelings (Huehls 31). In short, this fiction indicated a turn to the human. This rekindled interest in the human was intensified at the turn of the twenty-first century. Social and historical events such as the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy created the need to encapsulate the authentic "lived experience of individuals" (Greenwald Smith 4). At the same time, however, the extreme mediation of technology and forms of power in the lives of individuals brought about a heightened attention to the constructed nature of identities (Greenwald Smith 4). Thus, even academic discussions that seek to define the traits of this new literary movement maintain the alternation between the binaries of real, authentic, or meaningful and artificial, constructed, or meaningless. My thesis moves beyond the perennial polarity between the "natural (or the real) and the theatrical (or artificial)" (Davis and Postlewait 17), because theatricality proves to be indistinguishable from reality, hence rendering such distinctions redundant.

[8] Robert L. McLaughlin has identified the period of the contemporary as "post-postmodernism" essentially "for lack of a better term" (55). Mitchum Huehls employs the term "exomodernism" to indicate the period after post-postmodernism. In addition, "altermodernism" has been introduced to denote the more experimental or aesthetically resistant pieces of contemporary fiction. Alison Gibbons uses the term altermodern, introduced by the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, to suggest both the idea of "otherness" and the diversity or "multitude" of potentialities (238).

Neoliberalism

In this study, I will examine the concept of theatricality against the backdrop of the contemporary sociopolitical neoliberal context. I employ the term "neoliberalism" because first and foremost, the novels make evident the extent to which neoliberal ideology has infiltrated the social relations. Neoliberalism transcends its status as an economic doctrine and impacts the political framework at a micro level. In addition, there is a topical connection between neoliberalism and artistic values. Values that have been customarily associated with artists and writers such as flexibility, freedom, and creativity have been instrumentalized by the economy to serve neoliberal goals. The author, in turn, becomes the figure of the laborer par excellence because "contemporary labor" becomes "an aesthetic act of self-exploration, self-expression, and self-realization" (Brouillette 55). Ultimately, I situate my research in relation to discussions on twenty-first-century literature produced under neoliberalism.

The ubiquity of the term *neoliberalism* in contemporary discourses has led to the concept becoming slippery and difficult to define. According to political theorist Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is a "shifting signifier" that characterizes an economic doctrine,[9] a historical phenomenon, namely the reaction against Keynesianism, and the economization of non-market spheres (21). In this study, I use the third definition, according to which neoliberalism denotes the dissemination of market values in virtually all aspects of social and political life, such that the culture "configures aspects of existence in economic terms" (Brown 17). I mainly follow Brown's treatment of neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" that economizes non-economic aspects of life. In particular, I focus on the impact of

[9] As an economic doctrine, neoliberalism is an aggregate of economic policies that support the free market, implying a causal relation between personal freedom and economic freedom (Harvey 2). In neoliberalism, both the aspect of liberty and the focus on the individual attain a cardinal role. As the unimpeded flow of capital through free markets requires minimum state intervention, the state is merely reduced to establishing the "institutional framework" that instrumetalizes "free markets and free trade" (Harvey 2).

neoliberal practices on everyday life and the way they have been made normative, creating "a new understanding of human nature and social existence" (Read 26).

Neoliberal reasoning has transformed the individual into an economic actor (Brown 22). Individuals have become "projects of management" because of the necessity to behave "in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and … [the] future" by virtue of practices like "entrepreneurialism" and "self-investment" (Brown 22). This condition bears a resemblance to the *homo oeconomicus,* a figure of classical liberal economic theory. However, Brown explains that in neoliberalism, *homo oeconomicus* is not "a figure of exchange" anymore, but an object of "human capital" to enhance its "competitive positioning" (Brown 31). As a result of transforming all "market actors" into "capitals," the competition among agents inevitably grows (Brown 36). This neoliberal "self-fashioning," in which individuals seek to enhance their "portfolio value" (Brown 33-34), reaches the extent of "compulsory individualization" (McGuigan 233). For Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, compulsory individualization forces individuals to make "agonistic choices … along their life-course trajectory," which implies that they assume exclusive "responsibility" to deal with the implications of their actions (McGuigan 233). This is precisely what the neoliberal ethic demands, namely "a self … condemned to freedom and lonely responsibility" that merges "freewheeling consumer sovereignty with enterprising business acumen" (McGuigan 234).

The primary danger that Brown locates is the dismantling of the premise of democracy and the very idea of the collective. As "[g]overnance replaces a political lexicon with a management lexicon," Brown argues, "the democratic promise of shared rule [is transmuted to] the promise of enterprise and portfolio management at the individual and collective level" (207). The subject's individuality and self-responsibility sustains the

structure of the state as the participants compete according to normative rules. Nonetheless, the individual as "human capital" is found "at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment," irrespective of how faithfully s/he complies with the entrepreneurial ethic (Brown 37). This state of continual precarity in which the social dissolves into "entrepreneurial and self-investing bits" sets aside "umbrellas of protection provided by belonging" (Brown 37). The subject is, hence, both self-responsible and a disposable component of society (Brown 38). In this manner, the "social contract" is reversed because of the precarious state of each individual and the normative state that inequality acquires. Since inequality becomes "the medium and relation of competing capitals," concepts like subject and citizenship are reconfigured to an extent that the collective is utterly sidestepped (38-40). The market framework that is based on competition and individuality shakes the foundations of democracy and community.

I discuss the way in which neoliberal rationality has impacted the figure of the writer and the literary field, because writing processes and literary production are conspicuous themes in my texts. Sarah Brouillette claims that literature and its values such as creativity have come to form part of a vocabulary that promotes neoliberal practices. Brouillette's study, despite focusing on contemporary Britain, can be extended to global settings because it examines the "evolving relationship between cultural commerce and artistic autonomy" at a larger scale (6). Brouillette argues that artistic figures become the epitome of the contemporary laborer because of their flexibility and their opposition to the market. Artists, and by extension writers, as cultural laborers have come to constitute the model entrepreneur, or what Andrew Ross calls "paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood," due to the aesthetic of self-preoccupation and their bohemian flexibility in terms of work time and location (Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt 32). As this labor force displays "the much vaunted flexibility, autonomy and informality," its members become the optimal workers of the future (Gill and

Pratt 33). The figure of the contemporary author thus combines higher artistic deftness and commercial success, being both "an artist and an impresario, an aesthete and an entertainer, a thinker and a businessman" (West 5). The qualities of a writer's work have been extended to render "human subjectivity expressive, self-defining, self-referencing … and enterprising" (Brouillette 56). The field of literary production has also been reconfigured. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the literary field has been reconceptualized as a literary *game* and the literary agents as *players* (Lahire 415).[10] The undertones of flexibility in the meaning of game/player, and the implication that the writer engages in various practices instead of solely writing literature untrammeled, indicate the dominance of neoliberal conditions. In a similar vein, James English describes literary production as a game in the sense of the "competition among various cultural players or agents for better, more advantageous or 'monopolistic' positions on the field of artistic production" (249), perfectly encapsulating neoliberal ideology.

The market framework impacts the novels I examine both in their status as commodities and thematically. The protagonist of *10:04* is paid in advance to write a novel and he makes his novel's process of production a constitutive part of the story by structuring the narrative around its compliance with market demands. This compromise, occasioned by the author's institutional dependence, puts his artistic freedom at stake, as the author's motivation in writing the novel is money. The specter of compromise still haunts the form of the novel when he explains that a particular section has been solicited by a literary magazine, the *New Yorker*. As the story develops, the reader realizes that the self-compromised novel

[10] Bourdieu's field theory treats the literary and the economic field as distinct universes. There are strict demarcations between "pure" production, which is addressed to "a market restricted to producers." and large-scale production that is "oriented towards the satisfaction of the demands of a wide audience" (121). Bernard Lahire's theory, slightly recasting Bourdieu's terminology, enables a more contemporary framing of the literary/market dynamic.

produced according to market demands is, in fact, *10:04* itself. The encroachment of money on artistic freedom pertains to both Ben the protagonist and Ben Lerner the author.

The presence of the market is equally pronounced in *Gone Girl,* a commercially successful mystery novel. Popular genre fiction that aims at a mainstream audience often raises an eyebrow from critics, regardless of the fact that the roots of the novel as "a genre" lie "famously and honorably in middle-class popular culture" (Barth 203). In addition, the novel's main character, Amy, complies with neoliberal rationality. Her calculating and self-managing attitude is revealed when she turns her marriage into a competitive game. As Amy and Nick's marriage becomes a consumable story, the market, in the form of the spectators or readers, determines the game's outcome.

As the novels articulate authorial compromise, my analysis raises questions of authorial autonomy and dependence. Ben, the protagonist of *10:04,* partakes in economies of literary prestige, namely those of literary magazines, universities, and publication houses. Nonetheless, he produces a novel that reflects his compromised freedom. Amy, as a writer of personality quizzes, and Nick, as a journalist, are "alternative" types of authors who adamantly proclaim their writerly status. As the protagonists produce a story as part of a competition, they "develop an entrepreneurial posture toward [their] own art" and testify to the expansion of neoliberal values to artistic activity (Greenwald Smith 185). Neoliberalism attempts to bridge individuality and the market by legitimizing freedom through the market as the governing principle. Nonetheless, freedom's connotations as a driving force for the writer recede in contemporary times. Contrary to Henry James, who asserts that the apogee of artistic elevation is the author's sovereignty,[11] neoliberal freedom functions in concert with

[11] In the final pages of *The Art of Fiction,* Henry James exhorts novelists to strive for an almost eroticized relation with freedom, urging them to "take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent…rejoice in it" (407). In the materialization and consummation of this relationship, the writer becomes enchanted with freedom and

the dynamics of capital. Therefore, freedom becomes binding and entraps the author in a perennial state of anxiety and instability. Nonetheless, neoliberalism makes more transparent the financial considerations that are always part of literary production, thus demonstrating the façade of unfettered freedom.[12] Producing literature in the modern day is not connected with a paradigm shift in the sense of a rupture or loss of freedom, but rather with the surfacing of an economic reality not immediately perceivable.[13]

The common danger associated with novels produced under neoliberalism concerns the aesthetics of compromise and the contemporary reader. Mitchum Huehls locates the following threat or "burden" in twenty-first-century readers and reading practices: "having finally closed the door on poststructural indeterminacy, we find ourselves newly threatened by the enormous complexity of massively intricate assemblages" (160). Contemporary writers address this anxiety by producing literature that interweaves experimental and mainstream formal elements. The potential risk of this process pertains not only to aesthetic, but also political consensus. In discussing the convergence of market demands and experimentation, Maggie Doherty writes:

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eventually seizes it. The author's sovereignty in this exploration and eventual domination is the climax of artistic elevation.

[12] Bernard Lahire states that "the freedom of literary expression is centered and limited through the dependence of the creators on their financers" (419).

[13]A number of studies testify to the affiliation of authorships and economy, thus invalidating the romantic contention that art is independent of the market. In the *New Economic Criticism*, Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee attempt a brief historical tracing of the economies of professional authorship to stress their contingency and the vexed relationship between authors and commerce. Osteen and Woodmanse note that "market conditions ushered in the economy of writing" as soon as a type of professional writing that circumvented patronage was endorsed (7). Nonetheless, this started to dwindle with the dominance of the "elite" or modernist authors who opposed "a market-economic way of determining the value of their work" (7). The modernists' aversion towards markets fashioned "an entire aesthetics around [this] opposition" and led to their active seeking of patronage to sustain them (7). In turn, 20th century fiction witnessed a rise in commission writing (8). The shift to the market nowadays is described as transitioning from "a general dependence of writers on political and religious powers … to a general dependence of writers on the market as the principal source of income, and sometimes the commissioner of their work" (Lahire 419).

> "today's most celebrated writers marry experimentalism with accessibility; they produce prize-winning fiction with just a dash of formal excitement, enough to catch the eye of cultural gatekeepers but not so much that it renders a work unmarketable … Literature that appeals to the mainstream isn't just politically anodyne – it's aesthetically predictable. (*Dissent*)

Doherty traduces authors that "forge aesthetic compromise and favor political consensus" through experimental yet accessible literature on the grounds that this literature "reassures readers more often than it unsettles them" (*Dissent*). This phenomenon of "compromise aesthetics" is symptomatic of neoliberalism and, in particular, neoliberalism's "cultural entrenchment" (Greenwald Smith 183). As such, the specter of compromise aesthetics makes the hope for a "coherent avant-garde in contemporary literary culture" essentially futile (Greenwald Smith 191). Compromise aesthetics, therefore, seem to verify Mitchum Huehls's claims that literature produced under neoliberalism is either apolitical or "not inherently resistant" (30).

Nevertheless, literary theorists have recognized minor sites of opposition to the ubiquity of neoliberalism. Rachel Greenwald Smith identifies two paths of the neoliberal novel defined in terms of affect: the personal and the impersonal novel. [14] The personal novel "affectively reinforc[es] neoliberal norms as a result of its formal operations," because it generates comforting feelings for the reader (Greenwald Smith 11). The impersonal novel seeks to evoke more unsettling "emotional responses" in order to "undermine the personalization of aesthetic experience" (Greenwald Smith 20). Greenwald Smith promotes the impersonal novel because it avoids producing emotions that are treated as property. This

[14] Greenwald Smith's wording alludes to Zadie Smith's essay "Two Paths for the Contemporary Novel." The affinity between the two writers concerns the impersonal or mechanistic mode that they both promote as the future of the novel.

manner of resistance pertains to less conventional affects that do not uphold economic values. The "ontological turn" in fiction constitutes another form of potential. In particular, this form of literary criticism seeks "ontologically produced value" rather than economic or neoliberal value (Huehls 30). Although literature produced under neoliberalism "runs the risk of complicity with neoliberalism," it concurrently "develops techniques allowing it to intervene in or move beyond neoliberalism without capitulating to it" (Huehls 32-33).

I attempt to form an intervention through theatricality rather than ontology, because I emphasize the aspect of exaggeration and play. I use theatricality both as a way to intervene and as a capitulation to neoliberal practices to emphasize that moral judgments do not inhere within the term. The two novels under scrutiny in this thesis are not revolutionary because they abstain from an explicitly transgressive stance in which they question or defy the social/ethical neoliberal framework explicitly or fully. Nonetheless, both pieces comment on the neoliberal modalities of living through exaggeration and play. The novels expose the values of the neoliberal system through the conventions that inform social roles. By examining the explicitly theatrical relations and formal structures in the novels, I attempt a social critique through the notion of self-awareness inherent in role-play, and the iterable linguistic patterns.

Furthermore, theatricality is afforded critical power to comment on the structure of longstanding social institutions. *Gone Girl* employs a morbid playfulness that, despite challenging the norm of social roles by unveiling their reproducible nature, is nonetheless caught up in neoliberalism. Similarly, *10:04* does not blatantly disregard neoliberal values. Theatricality, however, attacks individualization, a core principle of the neoliberal political system, by offering possibilities of community. The protagonist makes a radical promise of a collective community to the reader through play. Although *10:04* and *Gone Girl* are affective narratives with moments of connection or suspense, their authors deliberately avoid

generating sentiments of sympathy, identification or ethical investment with the characters. In this sense, the commentary on social roles becomes more evident. As I will argue, the authors create both a comforting and an unsettling position for the reader by toying with his/her trust and skepticism. Consequently, these pieces of literature abstain from acting as a sedative or romantic escape for the readers.

In the first chapter, I examine Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl.* In the popular imagination, *Gone Girl* is synonymous with a bleak mystery story. However, I examine *Gone Girl* under a dystopian or perhaps morbid lens of theatricality. I argue that the marital relation becomes an enforced dramaturgical game mediated by neoliberal attitudes. The two protagonists wage a theatrical battle for the approval of the public, rendering marriage a neoliberal power struggle. Despite debunking the conventions of marital social roles, theatricality ultimately confirms the couple's perennial entrapment in neoliberal practices.

The second chapter focuses on Ben Lerner's *10:04* and attempts to retrace the potential of theatricality as a challenge to neoliberalism. I argue that the author emphasizes the sentiment of distance from the social roles he enacts - namely those of the prospective father, professor, and writer - which he criticizes through theatricality. I contend that because of his distance from social roles, the protagonist seeks possibilities of "being-with" the world and the reader through the theatrical. These theatrical practices enable the protagonist to offer a potential for community.

Throughout this study, I will highlight the dynamics of theatricality and neoliberalism. In so doing, I pair the macro-structures of neoliberalism as a political rationality with the micro-structures of everyday interactions through theatricality. By examining this interplay in twenty-first-century texts, I will explain how contemporary fiction as a whole can benefit from the theoretical concept of theatricality. In addition, I will show

the different ways that theatricality functions in relation to neoliberal contexts, either as a complicit or resistant force. I argue that theatricality does not have a morally intrinsic meaning, but a meaning contingent upon the way in which it is employed in various situations. Ultimately, I show theatricality's potential for critique through the structures of language and social discourse.

"There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet
There will be time to murder and create"
-T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Chapter One

Performative and Discursive Marital Rivalry in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* is structured around a theatrical response to marital relationships in the neoliberal twenty-first century. Neoliberalism informs the novel's economic backdrop and the micro-social structures at the level of the relationships of the characters. *Gone Girl* is centered on Amy and Nick, a married couple who are forced to relocate from New York to the Midwest due to simultaneous firings - a situation symptomatic of the 2008 neoliberal economic recession. The novel's neoliberal reality has previously been examined in relation to gothic reality,[15] but I instead investigate *Gone Girl*'s theatrical qualities in the context of its neoliberal framework. The main theatrical strategy of the plot is the dramaturgical game that Amy sets up to get revenge on Nick. Amy frames Nick for her disappearance by organizing an intricate incriminatory plan that is theatrically staged with props. In an attempt to prove his innocence, Nick himself engages in a similarly theatrical performance. An audience, hence, becomes indispensable for the evaluation of the performance and judging the victor. The dramaturgical game, the couple's performances, and

[15] Emily Johansen claims that "life under neoliberalism might itself properly be understood as gothic" because both gothic and neoliberal reality posit extremity and exaggeration as the "rule" in society (31). She discusses the emergence of a new literary genre entitled "neoliberal gothic," which constitutes a variant of the gothic novel that emerges "under neoliberal rationalities" (31). These novels, despite advancing a purported "rhetoric [of] continuous evolutionary improvement," create a dooming "sense of entropic decline" (31). *Gone Girl* itself has been hailed as an exemplary of the genre. In her analysis of the novel, Johansen examines quintessential gothic tropes such as the ruin and the uncanny against the neoliberal backdrop.

the position of the audience inform the novel's theatrical strategies. I argue that the theatrical game is embedded in the social roles of marriage. In addition, I contend that the audience ushers in the neoliberal dimension. On the one hand, the fact that the audience becomes a judge in the marital game raises the connotations of competition between the performers. On the other hand, as Amy and Nick's marriage becomes a media story, the audience becomes a prospective market for the consumption of the story. Theatricality, therefore, reconfigures the marriage as a neoliberal power struggle. The threads of performance and writing, as the couple's tools in the competition, and the audience/market, as the final judge, influence the power dynamics in the marital game and determine its end-result.

Performance

Theatricality in *Gone Girl* begins as a cleft in everyday life through the overly-staged dramaturgical game and the artificiality of performances. Leitmotifs throughout the novel from theater and film convert the marriage into a literal representation of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. First, Amy orchestrates the vengeful plan as an elaborate theatrical production. As a director, she stages a crime scene comprised of theatrical props, such as puppets, that inculpate Nick. She also uses a textual form of performance to support her story. Thus, an overt theatrical dimension is exposed as she directs and performs, albeit discursively, her own play. In addition, following Goffman's definition of performance,[16] the protagonists engage in performances to influence the audience and eventually win the marital game. The couple *acts* in both senses, both *taking action* and *performing* to alter their public image, as a means of vying for audience control. Both Amy and Nick become "cynical"

[16] For Goffman, performance is the participant's "activity … which serves to influence in any way ... other participants" (15).

performers with self-awareness of their masks (Goffman 18).[17] Despite Goffman's contention that enactment in everyday life is not planned in advance,[18] their performances are self-consciously enacted to accentuate the staged quality of their self-presentations and, consequently, demonstrate the theatrical dimension of social roles. The characters, hence, become the embodiment of the main critique of the dramaturgical man, as inauthentic or fake.

The novel's marital dramaturgy exposes the theatrical practice of role-play as an oddly ordinary marital reality. *Gone Girl* reveals the ordinary through the extreme or extraordinary, a practice that is typical of absurdist works. In such works, "the very extremity of their imaginative variations and playfulness constitutes their peculiar seriousness" because, by placing things outside the norm, they expose "what the normal always amounted to" (Wilshire 206). The norm works by being "repeatable," but it becomes effective when it "crowds out other possibilities of existence" (Wilshire 206). Theatricality in the novel shows that repetition – in the protagonists' attempt to practice a performance – and societal expectations, which obstruct alternative ways of acting, determine the normative social roles. The protagonists' reiteration of what is expected from their surrounding social environment reflects the impression management processes quotidian in marriage. According to Erving Goffman, both everyday performances and weddings are predicated on idealization processes. Goffman links the everyday reality of performances to a wedding because they both tend to reproduce "the officially accredited values of the society" and, thus, the idealized mores (35).[19] The performances reveal the socially and culturally embedded fronts in the

[17] Erving Goffman describes cynical performers as the performers that are aware of presenting a fake reality through their roles and that even take pleasure in manipulating the audience (18).

[18] Goffman claims that the "legitimate performances of everyday life are not 'acted' or 'put on' in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do" (73).

[19] For Goffman, everyday performances are based on idealization process because individuals perform the expected societal values. This process of idealization is similar to a "celebration" which is the "expressive

roles of husband and wife, indicating the theatrical elements involved in marriage more broadly. Just as the wedding affirms the values of the community, the theatrical strategies affirm the values of neoliberalism because they are employed as a form of Darwinian, survival of the fittest, triumph, as opposed to a communal effort towards joint social goals.

Although the game acts as a driving force in the narrative and the relationship, it gradually deconstructs marriage by exposing its theatrical structure. As the game ends to one member's detriment, it both invigorates and dooms Nick and Amy's relationship. In addition, performance determines the active and inactive characters in the narrative. Non-artificial reactions are not only inversely proportional to action but also prove to be detrimental for the characters. Nick, despite appearing to be the perpetrator in the first section, is reactive to Amy's traps as he proves unable to control his accidental gestures. Some of these naturally induced, and thus uncontrollable, reactions fail to conform to social etiquette, as when Nick reflexively flashes a "killer smile" at a press conference when he is expected to perform anxiety (64). The inability to maintain "expressive control" through these "unmeant gestures" carries across an incompatible image to the audience, who perceives Nick's performance as fake (51).[20] The perception of a situation by an audience ironically turns a sincere action into an artificial one. Nick starts taking action by controlling the image he presents and becomes proactive. In contrast, Amy's figure as a guiding force is reversed when she reveals her scheme to the reader and, thus, fails to *maintain* face. That she loses face to the reader earns her a minor retribution in the narrative. She ends up being mugged and becomes a prisoner to Desi Collins, the friend/savior that she turns to for help.

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rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community" (Goffman 35). The wedding is one of the foremost instances of such rituals.

[20] Goffman claims that the spectators come to be "secretly skeptical of the reality that is being impressed upon them … [when they see] trifling flaws" which, in turn, indicate that "the whole show is false" (51).

Amy's performance through the diary plays with the readerly expectations of an autobiographical document. Although for Goffman presence is a prerequisite for performance,[21] Amy displays a different form of absent performance that is carried across through the written medium. Her status as a puppeteer makes her a spectral presence, who despite being gone, allows her to be "more present than anyone else" (214). To stage her disappearance, she patterns it according to influences from her childhood, namely her fictional counterpart and the lingering absences of her unborn siblings.[22] In this act of self-representation, she consciously emulates a frivolous persona by deftly manipulating female stereotypes. As Amy endeavors to convey the impression that Nick is a violent character, the diary raises the implication that a bodiless textual voice exposes the reality of an abused woman's voiceless body. The direct statement to the reader that this fabricated persona was "meant to be likable… [m]eant for someone like you to like her" reveals her intention to trick the reader (237). The audience's easy manipulation also raises doubts regarding literal interpretations of documents coded as authentic. The fact that she constructs an artificial reality through a diary warns against surface readings. Moreover, she meticulously employs writing techniques, such as the slow escalation of Nick's guilt and her research before her disappearance, which convert her text from diary to fiction. She further plays with the reader through the double entendre "let me set the scene" that, while initially interpreted metaphorically, Amy ironically means literally as she reconstructs the scene anew.

Along with the diary, the double entendres of the treasure hunt clues help her achieve her two-fold aim: to manipulate the audience and make Nick realize his downfall. The clues

[21] According to Goffman, performance is defined as "the activity of the individual which occurs during a period marked by his *continuous presence* before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (22 emphasis mine).

[22] Amy describes that her parents' prior efforts to reproduce failed as the babies were never born. Amy explains that her stance towards the absent "dead princesses" was fundamentally competitive as the unborn babies attained an ideal spectral status (221).

are intended for Nick to instigate the treasure hunt game and force him to realize his role as a victim of Amy's manipulative plan. As he engages in the game, Nick turns into a detective to find out the solution to the mystery, even while he is suspected by the police as the perpetrator of Amy's disappearance. Therefore, the clues conflate the quintessential roles of the detective genre – namely the detective, victim, and culprit – in the figure of Nick. At the same time, the clues are directed to an external audience, primarily the police. The meticulous crafting of the clues is intended to create a contradictory reality in which two distinct meanings are generated. Writing as a form of communication per se is a rather useful means to achieve this task. On the one hand, writing has the "capacity to extend the reach of presence by overcoming the impediments that distance or absence afflicts on communication" according to Derrida (Loxley 76). In this manner, Amy can accuse Nick of her murder. On the other hand, Derrida claims that writing is "more liable than speech to … [create] a breakdown in communication" (Loxley 76-77). Amy avails herself of precisely this supposed shortcoming to create her double meanings and secure the breach in communication. In so doing, she manages to generate a particular impression of innocence to the audience, and make Nick alone understand her plan.

Theatricality in the domestic setting dooms the male characters of *Gone Girl*. Without a proper stage, the lack of spatial separation cancels the distinction between theatrical space and ordinary life. Amy outlines a trajectory of doom for Nick and her friend, Desi. For Nick, the theatrical game becomes a claustrophobic cat-and-mouse game, as Amy's meticulous planning leaves him unable to prove his innocence. His inability to rebut Amy's claims creates the impression that there is no escape from the mantrap, generating sentiments of asphyxiation or claustrophobia. Similarly, Amy's theatrical practices induce not only entrapment but also murder. While Desi keeps Amy captive, she uses erotic performance to liberate herself, patterning it to Desi's preferences to subvert his power. From her ethereal

and delicate presence through flower metaphors, she is transmogrified to a lethal femme fatale when she kills Desi at the peak of his erotic climax. The dark erotic consummation in which orgasmic climax is associated with death, as the climax of violence, shows Amy's sexual power and treachery as a murderess. Amy is a powerful and even monstrous figure in the domestic sphere, whereas domestic theatricality indicates the expendability of men. Indeed, physical violence underwrites the marital power game. Nick's recurrent fantasies of suffocating and ultimately killing Amy show the sadistic aspects of the game. Amy's intention to "invade every part of [Nick]" (400), and her self-description as a "thornbush" whose thorns "fit perfectly" into Nick's "fatherly stab wounds" (353), correspondingly indicate a physical proximity that is nevertheless grotesque. This proximity denotes an erotic act and, in particular, the act of the dominant member in the power relation. Concurrently, these metaphors of invasion subvert the male/female stereotype.

Nick retaliates in the game, however, through a coached verbal and bodily performance of the role of the husband. Primarily through the figure of Nick, the novel inserts the contemporary element in theatricality through the welter of media references appropriated from film and TV. Nick finds himself portraying "Concerned Husband" (23), or wondering "[w]hat does the husband say at this point in the movie?" (48). These self-observation practices that are suggestive of acting techniques manifest the permeable boundaries between everyday life and media reality. Nick enters the game by having his performance staged according to social expectations. By following the etiquette, he restores his prior negative image forged by reiterations of "inappropriate" acts (346). His lawyer acts as a coach or director, requiring "every word, every gesture, every bit of information planned out ahead of time" to create an effect "one hundred percent canned yet totally genuine" (312). The team, thus, aims for a form of "calculated spontaneity" (Goffman 32). The lawyer becomes the symbolic embodiment of society, a form of social imaginary that not only gives

"stage direction" to the performer, but also helps him create self-awareness of discourse's social meanings (Goffman 73). For instance, he points out the underlying negative connotations of the verb "revive" as "something [that] was dead," and urges Nick to use "recommit" instead (317).

The coaching enables Nick to cultivate an awareness of his public image in order to garner sympathy from the audience and control Amy's reactions. The bodily performance in the micro-interaction of the interview deploys a carefully selected front to convince Amy of his labor. Nick includes props, such as the tie and watch that Amy was particularly fond of, and the gesture of the "index finger in the cleft of his chin" as part of an "old secret code" (351). His attempt to appeal to Amy's selfishness is shown in his characterization of Amy as the "best woman I have ever known," followed by his self-diminution to elevate her in words, suggesting "you are more than I deserve" (351). His speech culminates with the fairy-tale pledge for an idealistic future of "making it up to you," and the promise of being "the best man in the world to you" (351). This reveals the emotional labor that he needs to display in order to persuade her.

Nick's self-presentation also demonstrates the iterability of social roles. When he reproduces an actor's words, he reveals the double-level of enactment: "I was the ultimate hollow man: the husband that … couldn't apologize finally did, using words and emotions borrowed from an actor" (333). The actor's contrived emotional and discursive display is equally applied to Nick, even as Nick challenges the norm of the husband's social role by exposing the role's imitative structure. By adopting an imitative action, namely the actor's performance, Nick reveals the inevitability of repetition as a habitual process.[23] Nick also

[23] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann attest that "all human activity is subject to habitualization" because any "action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort" (70-71).

obfuscates and subverts the ontology of the serious versus non-serious or performative speech act when he uses contrived speech in a setting outside the theater, namely in a personal interview.[24] The setting and the staged impression management converts the non-serious or parasitic to serious language and, ultimately, works to convince the audience. In this manner, he blurs the lines of authentic and contrived speech.

Amy's character reveals the aspect of intention in self-presentation through the self-consciousness of her social appearances and the selection in her roles. The construction of self according to performances is demonstrated in the roles that Amy incarnates throughout her life: "Preppy '80s Girl … Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate … Cool Girl and Loved Wife" (237). These roles indicate not only particular cultural types but also performance actions that accompany them in micro-interactions. Nonetheless, rather than a self-effacing identification with her roles, she retains a self-consciousness in the form of a "meta-role" that evaluates all the performances (Wilshire 203). As Amy does not believe "in the impression fostered by [her] own performance," she is not a "sincere" performer (Goffman 18). The selection of the persona she presents is related to the respective appearance she intends to promote.

Amy displays her adaptable fronts in her self-description through a personality quiz. In an attempt to determine the best way to present herself in a social situation, Amy drafts three standard possible options out of which she needs to select an answer. The fact that she has to pattern herself according to preexisting scripts verifies Goffman's contention that "fronts are selected and not created" (28). Nonetheless, Amy's reply is chosen on the basis of the image she wants to present rather than an attempt to determine her personality type and achieve self-realization. Therefore, the quiz reverses the process of self-understanding,

[24] For J.L. Austin, non-serious or parasitic language is primarily employed in theatrical settings whereas serious language is used outside the theater (Weber 9).

because all of the answers present possible social masks for Amy and their selection is contingent upon the personality traits she intends to emphasize. Moreover, the contextually appropriate performance is indicated through the fact that there is a "correct" answer. This "correctness" evinces the artificiality of self-realization processes because the focus is on showing rather than being. The image of perfection blurs the potential for genuine responses, and this self-conscious adaptability points to her neoliberal qualities. Her flexibility is also aesthetically shown through the metaphorical "collapse" of selfhood. As soon as the problems in marriage start, Nick observes that "the old Amy … literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy" (47). In a serpent-like fashion, Amy forsakes her own self as her reified soul and skin lie on the floor.

This reification, along with the selection process and adaptability, gestures towards the commodification of selfhood and the market dynamics that govern it. Amy's ease to adopt and expressively present different traits is paralleled to changing garments: "I was pretending … to have a personality. The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities. What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's au courant?" (222). Although she primarily refers to processes of self-presentation rather than personality, per se, she expounds the notion that selfhood is not something that one is but something that one does. Despite reversing Judith Butler's wardrobe metaphor with reference to gender performativity to deliberately stress the theatricality,[25] Amy essentially verifies Butler's contention that identity, akin to gender, is a "doing" (33). The fashion metaphor accentuates commodification and shows the market ideal in personality. This further underlines the aspect of plagiarized personalities: "It's a very difficult era in which to be … a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters"

[25] To avoid misunderstandings regarding gender performativity, Butler claims that gender is not a performance in the sense of a deliberate choice similar to a conscious selection of clothes from a wardrobe (ix).

(73). The idea of a social automat implies, apart from the commodified self, a fractured self that chooses elements of his personality from a patchwork of different sources. This attenuates even more the idea of the self as a coherent whole.

The implicit relationship between a socially appropriate self-presentation and marketability is demonstrated through Amy's literary role model, namely the main heroine of *Amazing Amy*, a children's book that Amy's parents created. Contrary to *10:04,* in which the narrator Ben controls his fictional identity by creating his own alter ego, Amy's fictitious counterpart is created by others. It is a model imposed on her by a perfect, albeit unreal, character. Even her parents equate Amy with the *Amazing Amy* heroine. As they await Amy's reappearance, her parents attest that they "can only hope that Amy comes back … Her story must continue … [as the] world is ready for a new chapter" (331). As it remains equivocal whether they refer to Amy or her literary persona, the two entities are conflated. The book's personality quizzes, in which the heroine opts for the "correct answer" according to social and moral standards, became popular with readers and made Amy's parents rich. This raises connotations that adopting the heroine's traits of perfection and female virtue will establish her appeal to an audience and will, consequently, lead to success in the marketplace. Therefore, a moral and virtuous self is implicitly associated with both symbolic and economic currency. This model reverberates throughout Amy's life, especially when she structures the marital game according to the values of winning over an audience.

The fictional role model shows that Amy seeks perfection in self-styling processes as a result of narratives, too. The importance of narrative in her life adds the storytelling dimension to the idealization process. Amy subsequently comes to structure her life as a story. The way she sees her life as a story is revealed as soon as she reaches a non-ideal point in her life, whereupon she unwillingly adopts the character of the "Unloved Wife" (237). Her determination to establish "a satisfactory ending" and prevent the "bad guy" from winning

(234), galvanizes Amy to take action and cause the change she wants in her life, rewriting her identity as a "Vengeful … Wife" (237). Thus, Amy not only perceives the situation through the lens of narratives but also patterns her social role to the respective literary role. In doing so, she attempts to idealize her status: "I began to think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick … restore my perfection … [and] make me a hero, flawless and adored" (234). As the elements of storytelling imbue her way of dealing with the situation, the story inspires the dramaturgical game.

Writing

The second form of competition in the battlefield of marriage is effectuated through language, starting with the protagonists as the two narrators of the story. As Amy and Nick narrate the story sequentially in the novel, an aesthetic rivalry is initiated through the threading of the two narrative perspectives. The protagonists appear as complementary entities due to the correlating dynamic between the endings and beginnings of the entries. For instance, Nick's entry that ends "Amy was gone" is associated with Amy's entry that begins "Well, well, well. Guess who's back" (24-25). Through these narratorial signposts, the novel bridges the spatial and temporal gap between their perspectives. Complementarity, however, does not necessarily stand for compatibility, as most of the time it denotes the exact opposite. For instance, Amy's desperation when she is mugged is inversely proportional to Nick's euphoria for his successful performance and its respective forceful impact on the audience (308-309). In addition, Flynn creates the terrain for a symbolic gendered duel through writing, alluding to the opening pages of Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land*: "Is the pen a metaphorical pistol? Are words weapons with which the sexes have fought over territory and authority?" (Gilbert and Gubar 3). Amy's punctured narrations demonstrate that writing is not a male prerogative. By writing the final entry in the novel and having "the last word" (415), Amy symbolically seals her victory.

Although the protagonists identify as writers, they are both ridiculed for their romantic conception of the writer's role. Both Amy and Nick are quasi-writers: Nick is a down on his luck journalist and Amy writes personality quizzes. They nonetheless proclaim their authorial identity with vigor. Although the presence of these alternative career types for writers constitutes an attempt to legitimize their value,[26] these roles are ridiculed at the same time. In a dooming delineation of the condition of the writer, Nick laments a bygone but rosy era and mourns the loss of his social recognition: "I used to be a writer … who wrote about TV and movies and books … when people read things on paper, back when anyone cared about what I thought" (4). Despite the transition from his job as a writer to a bar owner, he retains an almost fetishized obsession with his old magazine, keeping secret stacks of old issues and reading them in solitude. In turn, Amy seeks to justify her status as a writer with an almost child-like stubbornness and even irrationality. She makes syllogistic statements in which the conclusion does not follow logically from the premise, such as "I like writers, I am the child of writers, I am a writer" (10).

The competition is further accentuated with the protagonists as creators, as writing marks the definitive resolution in the power struggle. Both protagonists write their respective versions of their story individually, but only the story of the winner in the marital game will be published. Thus, the process of writing is initiated by virtue of a contest rather than an artistic inner self-expression. The novel makes larger claims on authorial motivations in terms of the financial consideration and competition. Amy becomes a writer to materialize her symbolic capital as a person rather than a writer, with her book becoming the reification of her value and worth. She seeks to legitimize herself through manipulation rather than the actual process of working on her craft. The fact that she produces a novel by leveling the opponent, accords with the contemporary field of literary production as defined by the

[26] Besides, Gillian Flynn herself also falls into this category because she was a former popular magazine writer.

aforementioned James English. As writing will reflect her victory and supremacy as a person, her self-righteous nature dictates the acquisition of the story's "control" (400). The primary reason that motivates her creative process, therefore, is her ego. Her infantile stubbornness and egotism are shown through the extensive use of the possessives: "[m]y story: mine, mine, mine" (400). Her intention to "pick the best deal and start writing" evinces the triumph of writing that is contingent upon money (400).

Neoliberal Practices

The competitive processes in performance and writing illustrate the reconfiguration of marriage as a neoliberal power struggle. Theatricality in the novel reveals the impact of neoliberal modalities of living on marital relationships and, in particular, the conversion of marriage into a terrain of competition. Amy structures the theatrical game itself around competition as the winner/loser rhetoric generates a fundamental inequality.[27] The economic terminology such as "losing" and the self-centered practices of getting what "you" want reveal the economic framework that permeates the relationship and the compulsory individualization in Amy's social role as a wife (225). Therefore, a relationship of intimacy is sustained according to what is personally fulfilling because, as Amy attests, Nick is "learning to love me unconditionally, under all my conditions" (414). The novel exposes the danger of extreme individuality, however, by employing the "I" and "me" dynamic.[28] Although for George Herbert Mead, the "I" and "me" is a fundamental process for the wholesome

[27] Wendy Brown asserts that neoliberalism reconfigures personal relationships as competitive and inevitably unequal.

[28] The "I" and "me" are considered necessary steps for the formation of selfhood according to George Herbert Mead. For Mead, the self "arises in social experience" and manifests itself through the "I" and the "me" (175). The "I" constitutes a spontaneous response to a social situation whereas the social "me" is associated with a more controlled reaction based on the "organized set of attitudes of others" that one consciously adopts (Mead 175).

development of the self, the "I" and "me" create a schizoid persona in neoliberalism. Amy's claim that "[o]nly I can save Nick from me" transforms the social "me" to the aggressive "other" (362).

In addition, Amy views her relationship in market terms. She considers Nick to be a good match for her because they have the potential to be "the most perfect union: the happiest couple around" (224). The superlatives indicate societal competition, similar to conspicuous consumption, with the exception that the display pertains to partnership and emotions, connoting symbolic rather than economic currency. Amy's statement reveals the political significance of emotions as well as what Sarah Ahmed calls the "duty of happiness," which, according to Ahmed, is exemplified in the institution of marriage (6). This imperative compels Amy to maintain Nick's idealized image, namely the "man he was pretending to be," because "women love that guy. *I* love that guy … [for he is] the man I signed up for … [and] the man I deserve" (393). Amy patterns her relationship according to social standards ("women") as well as market terms. These market terms turn marriage into a contract in terms of human capital. The fact that she models her relationship status according to the neoliberal spirit of competition clearly evinces her irrevocable entrapment in neoliberal logic. This display of excellence in terms of intimacy, however, exposes the underlining political connotations. Amy attests that "[u]nconditional love is an undisciplined love, and … undisciplined love is disastrous" (414). That emotions need to be controlled because emotional anarchy is catastrophic raises the implication that political anarchy is similarly detrimental. Therefore, by fetishizing emotional order, Amy implicitly endorses political order.

The Market/Audience

Along with competition, theatricality renders marriage an explicitly neoliberal power struggle that configures the audience as a prospective market to consume the marital story. Mobilization of public opinion becomes a sine qua non to win the power struggle because audience reactions determine the authenticity of the performance (Goffman 51). Thus, by evaluating the couple's performances, the spectators' verdict determines the winner in the game. Although both characters face or are in danger of facing trial, the audience's verdict primarily determines their fate in the end, a fact that points to media sovereignty. The couple needs to trigger the audience's attention to ensure the latter's participation as judges in the competition. The audience's interest is stimulated when the media translate Amy and Nick's marriage as a commercially valuable story. The marital story reaches the extent of commodification with the audience asking for "T-shirts for sale" (296). In turn, the couple's marriage becomes a form of public privacy responsive to popular demand. Just as the spectators consume the media story, the readers consume the winner's book. The book's legitimacy will be decided by the whims of the market, a factor that verifies Maggie Doherty's claim that the contemporary literary landscape is largely mediated by market demands. Amy's memoir, as the winning book, manifests the triumph of commercial fiction. Both the readers and the spectators are claimed as the winner's trophy in the end.

Despite the aspect of "new" media, the performance retains a theatrical dimension. That the media play a part in their performance implies that the story attains national dimensions. In Amy's case, the media are merely transmitting the story. Amy can even watch herself as part of the audience: "There I am! My debut!" (245). In Nick's case, the media is the means through which his performance is effectuated, either in the form of the video during his impromptu interview (299-300), or on TV during his National interview (350-351). It could be argued that a contrast emerges between "new" media and the old-fashioned

dramaturgy that includes the diary, props, and treasure hunts. However, theatricality becomes evident in the manipulation of the audience through the front and back regions of the house. As soon as Amy returns, the couple appears as a team in front of the cameras. As part of the game to "let the cameras get their fifteen seconds," the couple engages in affective performances either through the external front represented by Amy, or through the verbal and bodily engagement of Nick's physical proximity and his spoken concern (371). The front region is portrayed as a charade, though, and is put in stark contrast with the back region of the house in which the masks are off, despite the request for a theatrical "encore" (371). Flynn uses the front region to comment on the swift turning of a private reality to a public one by reversing the roles of actors and audience. When Nick overhears one journalist's personal story outside of his house, the front stage of the house turns the audience/journalist into actor and the actor/Nick into the audience: "Every morning his voice boomed in through my windows as he analyzed their date … I wanted to hear how the story ended" (370).

Readers of *Gone Girl* are differentiated from fictional consumer readers of the plot, as the former are able to perceive the theatricality of the character's social roles. Initially, the novel manipulates its readers because it follows the structure of a mystery story. The protagonists either fabricate the reality or dissimulate clues. Nick, for instance, deliberately allows narrative gaps and withholds the truth, actions that function as self-incriminatory elements and constitute red herrings in the narrative. In turn, Amy retains the fabricated diary to trick the reader and the police. Nonetheless, in the second section, both Amy and Nick reveal the back region of the narrative. The second section is a form of denouement in which the readers are directly addressed. This exposition becomes a textual form of backstage to which only the readers have access. Despite the initial series of trappings, the *Gone Girl* readers gradually become trusting, and the novel shows an affectless manifestation of intimacy with them. However, the novel has no intention of making the readers empathize

with the characters. *Gone Girl* deliberately attributes wrongdoings to both characters to avert any form of emotional investment or endorsement on the basis of ethics. Thus, the affective manipulation primarily pertains to suspense in the plot. This creates a Brechtian alienation effect, which constitutes a necessary distance for the readers to perceive the commentary on social roles.

The explicit manipulation of social roles reveals the affinity with the Impression Management theory practices and accounts for the couple's euphoric role distance. As the couple manipulates the situation and the audience to achieve an end-goal, their actions move beyond Goffmanian dramaturgy and reach the extent of Impression Management theory. The theatrical game becomes a means to an end as Amy and Nick engage in performances in order to win. As IM actors, they seek to dissimulate their emotions to avoid an image that might betray them, hence adopting the traits of the role as a mask. The couple sees the social role of husband and wife as theatrical roles that need to be enacted and, thus, consciously models their performance to the expectations of hoi polloi. The strategic planning of their acting corresponds with Impression Management because they deliberately twist reality to fit their larger purposes. Amy and Nick's self-awareness creates a distance from their roles because they deliberately emphasize or dismiss particular characteristics of the roles. Their role distance becomes euphoric because they willingly manipulate the situation for the purpose of winning the competition. As the performance is evaluated by an audience, their acts must perfectly comply with the role, otherwise their plan falls apart. Despite being counterintuitive at first, the articulation of the artifice as the reality proves to be successful in the final evaluation by the spectators.

Amy ostensibly wins the marital dueling, a fact that promotes the selfish - even Machiavellian - practices of neoliberalism. The supremacy of Amy as a neoliberal performer is evidenced in her publishing her story and effeminizing her husband. The fact that she tilts

the audience's opinion in her direction and writes the book seals her fake identity and satisfies her selfishness. At the same time, Amy symbolically claims independence by acquiring a trophy husband. Although Nick takes action and confronts Amy, he is not self-motivated in his performance. Rather, he is compelled to strike back, as Amy's game is essentially the springboard to his performance. Most importantly, he needs to be directed by another person whereas Amy is a self-reliant performer. Amy overreaches in her willingness to create the impression she wants. She is classified as the ultimate neoliberal achiever that would do anything to attain her goal because she resorts to visceral extremes such as self-mutilation to stage her abduction. This also nullifies the ontological distinction between reality and performance because this act of harm has a physical effect that is indistinguishable from "its accomplishment beyond the frame of performance" (Loxley 141).

Amy's entrepreneurial spirit is demonstrated in the meticulous organization of her plan. Her aim for excellence is formally shown through the reiteration of "check" on her lists to indicate that she achieves her goals. The perfection of the plan is accentuated even through a parallel with the perfect environment and the beauty of the scenery: "the best time of day, the July sky cloudless, the slowly setting sun … turning everything golden and lush, a Flemish painting" (31). The metaphoric relation of the grim plan as a form of art or natural beauty comes to aestheticize grotesque practices.

In the neoliberal marital game, ethics and justice are imposed according to personal standards rather than social or institutional expectations. Amy's unique power as a calculating wife is shown when her self-moderated moral code and warped system of justice prevail. Neoliberalism makes normative the conflation of morality with a calculating

attitude.[29] Amy relishes exercising authority over others with a total disregard of the consequences. This is indicated through her past victories in manipulating other people. The pattern of framing Hilary and Tommy O'Hara might be read as a portfolio of previous accomplishments as a puppeteer. Putting people in a pattern is also aesthetically indicated when Nick and Tommy perform identical moves. The fact that both men are "drinking" as they are talking on the phone points to their common framing (277). Amy's success is attributed to "segregating the audience" in order for the others not to understand this pattern (Goffman 49). In addition, she does not have any qualms over her acts, a trait that demonstrates her determination and distorted ethics. As a former victim attests, "Amy likes to play God when she's not happy," and she does so by "dol[ing] out punishment" (276). This is achieved, however, by constructing games and assigning specific roles to her victims. In this sense, she adds a punitive dimension to the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in which Amy, as the supreme power, determines the fate of her puppets.

Amy's self-centered ethics are legitimized by her escape of punishment for murdering Desi. This indicates her ability to outwit the criminal legal system and its institutions, as she mocks the institutions through her theatricality. When she is being questioned by the police after her return, the interrogation process is ridiculed by being aesthetically depicted in a scenario-resembling question-and-answer format. In addition, the interrogation becomes a theatrical role-play, as Amy's testimony is untrue and the policeman's questions are repetitive and standardized. Amy's portrayal as a lethally clever performer is depicted when Nick introduces her to the reader through a synecdoche that foreshadows her smartness, namely her head: "[w]hen I think of my wife, I always think of her head … [and] what's inside it … her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts" (3). Her unorthodox morals also

[29] "In making the individual fully responsible for her/himself," Wendy Brown argues, "neoliberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it relieves the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences."

impact the way she imposes justice. Contrary to Nick's institutionally bounded sense of justice, Amy displays a retributive form of justice. For Nick, justice is denied when Amy remains unpunished by the police or the criminal legal system. He then fails to turn to other means to restore it, such as becoming a vigilante. Amy, on the other hand, takes the situation in her hands and imposes her own sense of punishment.

Despite Amy's ostensible dominance in the relationship, both Amy and Nick are trapped in their respective social roles. Nick is delegated to the role of the silenced spouse as Amy imagines her impending performance at her book tour: "the world will listen, and Nick will have to smile and agree" (406). Amy also impedes Nick's creative process through blackmail. Since Nick needs to erase his story to secure his child's well-being, he remains condemned to creative obscurity. Along with sacrificing his art for the child, he also sacrifices himself. Amy keeps Nick captive both to their marriage and to performance. Nick remains chained to his social role as a husband and, in particular, to the role of the happy husband. The literal and metaphorical entrapment is further established through Nick's perennial fear of Amy's criminal nature: "I am a great husband because I am very afraid she may kill me" (405).

Nevertheless, the theatrical game entails Nick's wholesale transformation as a character. Amy helps Nick attain self-realization through the textual clues that form part of the anniversary scavenger hunt. As an annual tradition, Amy composed clues which Nick had to decipher to reach the final destination and his gift. In the theatrical game, though, the clues become shamefully personalized because they are placed in loci where Nick was unfaithful to Amy. This creates the necessary guilt for Nick to recognize his mistake through Amy as authority. Nick's failure to conform to marital rules forces him to revert to the basic structure of societal rules with which he has to comply. The textually-mediated interaction indicates the realm of the symbolic, as Nick enters society by deciphering linguistic signs and visual

codes. Nick becomes a responsible man in the end as he is resolute to protect his unborn child and decides to punish Amy according to the legal system. Through the restoration of justice, he attempts to create order and bring catharsis to himself and the reader.

Amy is similarly trapped in the idealized social role of wife, as she prioritizes the ideal over exploring her true self more fully. Amy eventually acknowledges the existence of a "Real Amy in there" (225) thanks to Nick. The fundamentally social process of selfhood is, therefore, revealed, as her self arises through another person. Despite connotations of dimensionality or spatiality in selfhood, which allude to the self as a vessel ("in there"), what is essentially at stake is the freedom to choose the path one will follow. Michel Foucault, influenced by the Stoics, argues that "the experience of the self is not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one's available freedom" (276). Amy's freedom is circumscribed, however, by neoliberal ideology. Her compliance with neoliberal ways of thinking and acting mediates her autonomy because she eventually "conforms to the status quo" (Johansen 42).

Amy's win similarly proves to be a mirage because the veil of victory conceals that her normative neoliberal conduct is the ideal systemic outcome. As Amy cannot recognize her self-entrapment, she becomes a triumphant figure only on the surface. Therefore, her self-realization is futile in the end because she decides to retain the façade of the role of wife and live in a self-conscious delusion. In this sense, she will establish the happy closure of her story. Although Amy appears to be the puppeteer in the marital game, both figures prove to be puppets in the end because they are trapped in normative social roles and the neoliberal ethic.

Gone Girl delineates a nihilistic outlook for the future of humanity through the figure of the baby, as performance and core neoliberal values are transposed onto the structure of

the family. Prospective children denote the potential of futurity by raising connotations of innocence and upholding the nation as ideal citizens.[30] Nonetheless, the advent of the child in *Gone Girl* signals precarity and danger, instead, because of the type of family that is represented by the couple. The baby marks the transition from the social roles of wife and husband to the roles of mother and father. As a mother, Amy achieves her physical reproduction by scheming against Nick. Thus, in her reproduction, she uses the same process with which she prevailed in her creative production. That she uses Nick's sample from a fertility center also indicates the artificiality of reproduction. In turn, Nick proves to be a caring paternal figure, as he sacrifices himself and his art for the baby. In addition, the baby serves as a living reminder of neoliberal behavior as s/he is conceived as a means to win the competition. Amy extends the framework of competition and market logic to the family with her intention to "becom[e] the world's best, brightest nuclear family" (415). The fact that Amy and Nick's child will be raised in a microsociety of veneers, in which model parents will perform this perfection, compromises its ostensible innocence. The couple's everlasting performance to retain the image of domestic perfection indicates the annihilating aspect of theatricality when paired with neoliberalism. Although theatricality exposes the structure of marriage as performative, the result is the protagonists' entrapment in social roles. Reduced to such a function, theatricality can only consolidate neoliberalism.

Nonetheless, the whirlwind of roles and scripts also operates as a caricature of the contemporary social and cultural situation. Through the protagonists' exaggerated presentation, *Gone Girl* reduces the contemporary social dynamics to absurdity. As the systemic dynamics are theatrically – and somewhat psychotically – enacted by the main

[30] Lauren Berlant attests that the American child and the American fetus, in particular, have come to represent the ideal citizen. Berlant postulates that the nation generates "a normative image of ideal citizenship as a kind of iconic superpersonhood, of which the fetus is the most perfect unbroken example" (87). In this sense, the children and fetuses are the par excellence citizens due to their innate innocence. Untainted by the world, they constitute an icon to uphold national identity and direct the future.

characters, Flynn deliberately creates a theatrical distance from the characters to encourage a distanced critique on the part of the readers. The capitulation to neoliberalism is, therefore, employed to enhance the farcical (re)presentation of contemporary coupledom.

"The drama lies all in this –
we have this illusion of being one person for all,
of having a personality that is unique in all our acts."
– Luigi Pirantello, "Six Characters in Search of an Author"

Chapter Two

(Social) Roles and Community in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

Having delineated a version of theatricality that reinforces neoliberalism, I turn to Ben Lerner's *10:04* to examine how theatricality can be reclaimed as a resistant force to neoliberal practices. *10:04* weaves together multiple stories indicative of neoliberal uncertainty ranging from middle-aged workers' unemployment to the anxieties of a younger generation. I will focus on the anxieties of the main character, named Ben, in a number of the social roles that he enacts. Ben is a struggling author commissioned to write a new book that complies with market demands. At the same time, he is a professor at a higher education institution and a prospective father. In all of these social roles – the author, professor, and prospective father – a theatrical dimension is critiqued. The theatrical strategies that inform the novel's plot pertain to the performative dimension of Ben's roles and the distance felt by him in relation to the traditional definitions of the social roles. In addition, the writer employs theatrical strategies at the level of form, namely through repetition. Lerner inserts appropriated forms, either material documents or linguistic units, in order to reflect the structure of a scene in a scenario-resembling fashion. In this chapter, I will argue that the theatrical dimensions of the main character's social roles preclude the possibility of his connecting with said roles. The protagonist, instead, seeks to create what I call a "symbiotic relationship" with the reader by means of theatrical play in the text's form. This leads to an attempt to create a form of

community through language, a community that he fails to establish with the rest of his social environment.

Theatricality in social roles

1. Father

The protagonist experiences a disconnection from the role of the prospective father because of his fear of incompetence, a fear aggravated by a sentiment of being relocated to an infant's role. Throughout the novel, Ben suffers a constant feeling of failure as he interacts with children or university students as a symbolic preparation for the role of father. This is exemplified during his interaction with an elementary school student named Roberto at the Museum of Natural History. His acute fear generates personal anxieties to the extent of "question[ing] any account of [him]self as normative, mature" (146), and revealing his "manifold inadequacy" (147). The dread of parental incompetence is magnified because the protagonist feels that he is infantilized. The protagonist openly concedes that "I was the nervous kid far from home longing for my parents, not Roberto; I was the one who kept clinging to his hand" (148). His role reversal similarly takes place in other institutions. In the doctor's office, not only is he "simultaneously infantilized" by younger women for his pathology, but he sits on the lower chair for children (6). His friend, by contrast, sits on the adult's chair, that positions her automatically in control.

The Theater of the absurd scene between the author and his imaginary daughter aptly satirizes his preparation for fatherhood through the way that the daughter matures at an unnaturally accelerated pace. The protagonist begins learning the fatherly role by conjuring his future child in his imagination. At first, Ben assigns the role of a preschooler to his child. The author employs simple language to explain in a fatherly manner the changing dynamics

of desire and reproduction. The transition from the clearly delineated roles of father and child to professor and student takes place when the author correlates physical reproduction to economic production. Similar to an introductory lesson to the principles of economics, the author appears to be a teacher talking to an elementary school student. The quick escalation of the child's maturity is evidenced with inquiries such as whether "IHU [can] be used for gender selection," which transitions the elementary student to a teenage student (92). The author's teacher status is retained and enhanced with his typical professorial replies, such as "Great question" (93). His parental/teacher authority, however, is partly supplemented by technology. In response to his daughter's questions, he openly admits his ignorance and urges her to turn to technology instead: "I don't know. Ask your phone" (93). The daughter's advanced economics question regarding "the per capita income in China," expedites her transition into adulthood (93). The swift transition of the daughter from a child to an adult evinces the protagonist's own inability to act out the father's role for a long time and focus on the child instead of himself. The adult discussion nullifies the hierarchy associated in the relationship between father and daughter. The absence of a hierarchy exposes the author's narcissistic tendencies as he steers the focus of the discussion back to his own anxieties.

The fatherly anxiety that dovetails with artistic compromise makes clear the mirror-like, almost schizoid, qualities of the discussion. The protagonist's subconscious positions the daughter in the role of the author's artistic superego, acting as the prosecutor, and the writer in the role of the defendant of his art. The present absent daughter plays devil's advocate regarding the supposedly demoralizing effects of the author's artistic compliance to secure marketability. The child admonishes him for trading a "valorization of difficulty as a mode of resistance to the market" to secure a wider circulation among his "coeval readership" (93). Thus, the author loses his opportunity for aesthetic resistance by sacrificing the challenge of difficult writing and renouncing a potentially timeless legacy. This exposes the protagonist's

anxiety about the compromise and attempts to justify the compromise with the financial reality of catering for the baby. Upon realization that the author is "projecting [his] artistic aspirations on [the baby]," the narcissistic portrayal of fatherhood is made transparent (93). Akin to Nick in *Gone Girl*, who makes an artistic sacrifice to secure his baby's future, Ben makes concessions in his profession as an attempt to secure his child's living expenses. The paradox, however, is that the adult seeks to account for his artistic choices to the child, rather than the reverse. The friction between the daughter as the judge and the author as the accused culminates in his desperation due to a proleptic anxiety for the child. To the child's question of whether he can "imagine the world if and when [she is] twenty? Thirty? Forty?" he admits his fear: "I could not. I hoped my sperm was useless" (94).

The demands of physical reproduction expose the process of love-making as performative. The author tries to make reproduction a political statement by claiming that "love has to be harnessed by the political" (94). In his case, however, love is harnessed primarily by the artificial. First, reproduction is effectuated through IHU as a technological process. Second, even reproduction through sexual intercourse turns out to be a performance. In their sexual intercourse, the author and his friend, Alex, follow medical advice regarding specific sexual practices to ensure conception. The social performance also dictates uttering standard phrases and maintaining eye contact (203). As in their most intimate moments the gazes are parallel (8), the presence of various prescribed forms of gazing suggests precisely the alienation or distance of incarnating a theatrical role. In this manner, the author formally diminishes the significance of love-making by exposing the thin line between the real and the artificial in a fundamentally performative experience.

While describing their effort to conceive, Ben also makes punctured references to an inside joke according to which he pretends to doubt the Apollo moon landing. The joke came

to constitute a "ritual" that would "affirm … the priority of [their] relationship over other modes of coupling" (200). The entrenchment of the joke in their relationship acts as a reference point that Lerner employs to indicate actual temporal changes in the protagonists' lives. Starting from college, the author continues using the joke at later points when "the cancer had spread to [Alex's] mother's spine," and ending up to "now," with Alex's mother in an advanced stage of cancer (200). Its usage in various spatiotemporal contexts situates the passage in time and, in particular, how the change in time is inscribed on the body. Throughout the scene of their sexual encounter, the author intersperses pieces of the joke in the narrative in the form of purported arguments. Since he cannot utter the joke in the dialogue, lest he ruin the moment, he inserts it formally, as a thought process. These parenthetical spaces safeguard their profound relationship and indicate the passage of time as inscribed on Alex's body because this is the moment when their child is conceived. The performances and the comic interventions parody the experience of conception, demonstrating that farce and performance are ingrained even in the most profound moments in parenthood.

The character's unconventional manner of conception with his friend, points to the new family structures that reconfigure the social role of father. This alternative family model, formed between two friends rather than a couple, resembles the concept of alternative parenthood already present in Amy and Nick's family. Contrary to Amy and Nick's destructive complementarity, Ben and Alex's family alludes to a contract between friends in which sexual encounters are not a prerequisite. Indeed, throughout the novel, Ben experiences only artificial sexual encounters, negated romances, or downplayed sexual experiences with someone besides Alex. As opposed to *Gone Girl*, where Amy chooses Nick for his best qualities, Ben reckons that he is being chosen "for [his] deficiencies, not in spite of them" as "a new kind of mating strategy for millennial women" (151). In his role as a

twenty-first-century father, he is given the choice to be "a donor or a father" according to his "level of involvement" (91). Despite being presented as a binary, paternity becomes a matter of degree by virtue of the "level" of his engagement. In addition, millennial paternity is characterized by a contradictory feeling of desiring dependency on the part of the child and concurrently dreading it. Ben wants to feel needed by a person, a fact that reveals his individualistic motives to be a father. Ben openly admits his "selfishness" in wanting a child because "nobody depended on [him] for this fundamental mode of care, of nurturing, nourishing" (47). On the other hand, he feels insecure with his dim chances of becoming a capable parent.

2. Professor

In the role of professor, a fatherly dynamic merges with an institutional aspect. In the protagonist's interaction with a graduate student named Calvin, fatherly connotations arise when the author takes a personal interest in Calvin and attempts to appease the student's existential anxiety. In this sense, the professor/student interaction veers from the academic and reproduces the power dynamic of the family institution. The university setting, therefore, becomes a peculiar topos whereupon work and the affective component are enmeshed. Nevertheless, Ben performs his institutional role as a professor, attempting to maintain his academic "face" throughout the interaction in order to discursively confine Calvin within the contours of the institution. This is manifested when the professor attempts to tame his student's creative energy in order to meet academic goals (217). The degree of his institutionalization is disclosed in his effort to provide guidance. In the performative language of consolation, the personal undertone is supplanted by a quasi-bureaucratic style reproducible to other institutional contexts. The author resorts to an abstract language of crisis, such as "this is a crazy time," and reiterates variations of "stressed" and "stressful" to

facilitate a therapeutic process (219). Despite his vague advice on communal ties, he essentially promotes the neoliberal focus on the individual self, as one is responsible for one's "own days" independently (218). On the basis of mental health and "feeling comfortable in our own skin," the author makes psychiatric advice not only the solution but also the norm (218). In this way, he reenacts the bureaucratic practice of directing to another institution, the psychiatric clinic, instead of directly engaging with the student on his level.

The university also becomes a place of patrimony because it confers symbolic capital and an institutionally bound concept of literary production to the student. The elements of economic capital and children's inheritance that are implied in the meaning of patrimony are slightly modified in the university setting. University patrimony transmits symbolic rather than economic capital while the inheritance pertains to literary values and practices that sustain the university. Ben's role as a creative writing professor generates this symbolic capital. Published writers that become university professors in creative writing programs are often seen to act as role-models for college students (McGurl 408). They also enhance the university's "overall portfolio of cultural capital" and the "market value of the degrees it confers" (McGurl 408). This entails an exchange of symbolic capital between writers and universities. This reciprocal capitalizing on each other results in the reproduction of a literary value that inheres in the university. By (re)producing this literary value, professors perpetuate an institutionalized ideology of literary production, which becomes the university's self-sustaining practice. This artistic institutionalization is manifested through the character of Calvin as a "graduate poet" (213).

The protagonist experiences a disconnect from the role of professor because his impulsive reactions are contrary to the prescribed actions of the role. Despite his uneasiness with the institutionalized aspects of his profession, he complies with the institutional norm.

Calvin delivers a fervent lecture to the author displaying an acute sensitivity to the precarious present. In spite of Calvin's disorderly presence, the author acknowledges the perceptive commentary in his seemingly delirious speech and recognizes germs of his own anxieties. He abstains from verbally endorsing Calvin's ideas, however, "although all of that was to my mind plainly true" (220). The fact that he reprises a role becomes evident when he attempts to pattern his actions on Whitman's hypothetical reactions to copy the actions of an authority: "[h]ow would Whitman have tended such an illness?" (219). Thus, Ben becomes fully self-aware that he is distanced from the professor's role. However, he retains his academic mask and his dispassionate tone. Despite Ben's willingness to control the academic situation through his performance, the student recognizes his attempt to play a role. Calvin chastises the author for his effort to "pathologize" him. He also accurately and perceptively identifies Ben as "represent[ing] the institution … [because it] speak[s] through [him]" (219). Although the protagonist is cognizant of his instantiation of institutional practices and discourse, he nonetheless follows the standard institutional route by emailing the immediate authority of his colleagues and his departmental chair, as well as Calvin's fellow students. On the borderline between intimacy and the impersonal, email as a form of communication retains socially permissible boundaries. Although Ben ends up emailing Calvin, too, the electronic mask widens the distance and the chance for face-to-face intimacy is lost. His final recognition of the poetic potential of Calvin's "bulk of writing" ultimately renders his prior advice on psychiatric services gratuitous. The spiraling form of Calvin's writing symbolizes a form of communication that language cannot express (220). Since its potential lies in representing the linguistic unrepresentable, psychiatry will never be able to unearth this unique power dynamic due to its extreme reliance on language. Therefore, Ben's recognition of his institutionalization reveals the separation from the role but also his dread to go beyond it.

3. Writer

The professor's role is interrelated with Ben's status as a writer and his writing style. Ben works as a professor to make a living along with being a writer, a social phenomenon that Bernard Lahire describes as the "*double life* of the writer" (445).[31] Moreover, an interesting connection is traced between Ben as a creative writing professor and the fact that he writes autofiction, because the aesthetic of self-exploration has been institutionalized through creative writing programs.[32] The academic lens also informs Ben's – and Ben Lerner's – way of writing. Ben reflects on and evaluates everyday situations as a critic. He applies critical theory to the text either in a clearly academic mode, as when he evaluates Whitman's memoir (168), or as part of his thought process. For instance, his attempt to avoid "cast[ing]" a woman in a social role that complies with "normative male fantasy," shows the influence of feminist theory on his line of thinking (86). Theory, thus, becomes embedded in his thinking and writing.

Ben's processes of self-reflectivity, endemic to practices of evaluation and autobiography, are structured around observation rather than self-discovery. The self-reflexive writing of a biography inherently connotes self-exploration and gestures towards the therapeutic or cathartic elements of this process.[33] In contrast, the author takes an interest in

[31] This phenomenon indicates the contemporary haphazard landscape of authorship in which professional writers enter the literary universe "only intermittently" because the precariousness of the field compels them to work second jobs to sustain themselves (Lahire 443). Lahire sees this phenomenon as a pathological, "schizophrenic," condition because of the attempt to normalize the authors' disappointment as a result of their inability to focus wholeheartedly on their art (445). In addition, writers need to balance the internal strife associated with their individual identity as authors, and the material conditions of their life, in other words "the moneymaking foot that allows the other one to 'dance'" (Lahire 448).

[32] According to Mark McGurl, central to the creative writing program's formation was the "personality of the student itself, who in a circular process of literary-existential autopoiesis would find and fashion a self…in the very act of creative self-expression" (86). Hence, the process of discovering and shaping selfhood could be effectuated mainly through a writing based on "personal experience" (McGurl 86).

[33] Sarah Brouillette argues that the self-referential attitude of the author functions as a therapeutic process to find his own self (15).

the sheer process of self-observation because of the vanity of determining one's "true" self. As Eric Bennett attests, Lerner is "the most celebrated of those who had rewritten Cartesian metaphysics for the twenty-first century. I observe myself thinking, therefore I am" (378). Not only does the writer observe himself thinking, but also performing. This is evidenced through the pervasive trope of the author's disembodiment in watching a performance of his self. By being detached from his body and gazing back to observe himself, he becomes the main character in his written biography and the protagonist in a movie about his life. Ben describes the process of "crossing [the bridge] in the third person, as if [he] had somehow watched [him]self walking" (135). The author in this case acts both as the external eye of an audience or a camera, and as the actor who performs, thus revealing the self-centeredness of the gaze. This disembodiment also exposes the ease with which the protagonist can be dissociated from his self. This distance from his body parallels the distance to his social roles.

The distancing effect is attributed to the protagonist's effort to escape from contemporary autofiction's almost suffocating preoccupation with the personal. Autofiction is a recent literary trend characterized by self-reflexive or "memoiristic" qualities. These memoir-novels, Eric Bennett argues, primarily "chronicl[e] the isolation and meaninglessness" of individuality and are, therefore, "[a]nnealed in the crucible of the personal" (377). Rather than a cleansing feeling, this portrayal of personal experience creates a sense of condemnation to individuation. This representation of personal experience exposes the stifling qualities of not only individuality but also neoliberalism that posits individuality as the ultimate value. At a distance from the liberating Sartrean vein, the phenomenological viewpoint of the crucible indicates even a physical confinement, from which the individual is urged to escape.

Ben shows the performative dimension in the writer's role through the inherent connection between the three authorial figures of *10:04.* As the action proceeds, the reader realizes that the protagonist's process of writing the book is materialized in *10:04* itself. Thus, the character of Ben becomes Ben Lerner's fictional avatar. At the same time, the protagonist inserts his own fictional counterpart entitled "the author." Hence, the authorial figures in the novel include the actual writer Ben Lerner, the protagonist Ben, and Ben's fictional counterpart or "the author." In essence, they constitute one, yet tripartite, figure. The point where all three personas are conflated is inserted at the beginning of the first artificial letter: "*Dear Ben*, I put down" (127). The first person "I" and the first name constitute the identity of all figures, an action that both signifies and enacts the identity. In this sense, Lerner includes seeds of his self in every authorial voice. Along with the discursive performativity, there are actions that are physically performed, such as the act of writing down. The phenomenological perception of the first-person narrator in the phrase "I deleted" shifts to a third-person narrator in "the author would go back later" (128). These actions are or will be simultaneously performed by all authorial figures despite their different perspectives and experiences. The fact that fictional and non-fictional personas engage in activities at the same temporal moment liquefies the boundaries between real and fictitious selves. Also, by using the first-person pronoun and the third person of "the author" interchangeably, Lerner creates an overarching ontological confusion between the authorial figure as a person and his status as a writer, more so than any other social role. The fact that Lerner enacts his identity through writing indicates his agency in the performance of selfhood.[34]

[34] Mark McGurl contends that creative writing helps the individual acquire agency in the performance of the self. Because to "perform in this world is to say 'I am,'" McGurl writes, "creative writing supplies a special effect of personal agency in that performance" (398).

As a young prospective writer, the protagonist structures the staging of his persona on preexisting patterns. From the outset, the young protagonist's primary aim as a writer is prominence, as he seeks to "distinguish" himself from "other young writers" (35). His impulsive intentions to "read everything" and "invent a new prosody" only manifest youth's immature predilection to acquire the unattainable totality of knowledge and seek novelty (37). He achieves his goal of standing out, however, by *performing* literary adeptness. This performance, in turn, is effectuated by recycling already legitimized knowledge through the process of memorizing and acting out lines like a scenario. In the performance of knowledge, his intelligence needs to be validated by an audience to have an effect. Only when an interlocutor confirms his value does his knowledge become legitimized, even if the result is "a patchwork of interpretative clichés and errors of fact" according to the author's adult voice (35).

The main character ridicules the role of the writer as a fraud by exposing his own performance as a professional author. Ben starts as a visionary, even rebel, writer who ostensibly refuses to compromise, and transitions to the flexible, perhaps even submissive, professional writer. When the *New Yorker* editors compel the author to reduce a particular section of his story, a cut that would eviscerate the core idea, the author initially withdraws his story. On the grounds that the magazine encroaches upon his artistic freedom, the author initially claims that he intends to resist institutional interference by not being "one of those people … who lets *The New Yorker* standardize his work" (56). His disdain and contempt are equally manifest in his refusal to have his work meddled with for "marketability" purposes (56). The author's refusal to be constrained initially upholds the myth of heroic or martyr-like authorship. Nonetheless, the moral principle proves to be a hoax when he admits savoring "the opportunity to turn *The New Yorker* down," hence disclosing an egoistic motivation (56). He discursively performs the role of a rebel to the *New Yorker* editors by drafting an erratic

"typo-filled" letter and expressing his irritation towards the editors that "violated the integrity of [his] writing" (56). By virtue of these grandiloquent statements, the writer attempts to present the editors as the violent conquerors that intend to infringe upon the purity of his writing. In addition, by making his writing a distinct entity, equipped with an individual moral compass, he deflects responsibility away from himself. Nevertheless, the first person possessive pronoun reverts back to him. *10:04* mocks its own poetic persona, and by extension Lerner himself, to satirize the self-aggrandizing attitude of certain writers, pointing out the mercurial stance of writers as merely performance. What accentuates the irony, is the fact that following this performance, the author decides to accept the offer after all.

The author's acquiescence heralds the transition to the flexible neoliberal and reveals his compromised status as a professional novelist. The hero fantasies fray and ultimately perish because he is not a fallen hero whose effort to resist the market forces is in vain, but a sellout that willingly capitulated to the institution and, therefore, the "system." However, the writer's flexibility to make the concessions shows the ultimate entrepreneurial move because of his swift versatility. This substantiates the argument that the writer is the entrepreneur *par excellence*, owing precisely to his adaptability (Gill and Pratt 33). His self-labeling as a sellout is inversely proportional to his entrepreneurial, neoliberal side. As his artistic non-compromising side decreases, the neoliberal side increases. To bolster his professional image and correct the mistake, he drafts a letter of apology to the institution. With his agent's intervention, the letter is meticulously crafted to emphasize traits that excuse the writer's behavior, such as youth and impulsiveness, and to praise the institution indirectly. The agent, therefore, "sells" the author's image properly. In the letter, the agent becomes the mentor who attempts to fix the writer's error. In this manner, the novel unveils the illusion of the

writer's authority.[35] The alternation of the writer's moods is primarily revealed discursively through one frantic letter and the polished one. These fluctuating performances indicate the author's versatile self which can only be mitigated by the agent as an authority. The positioning of the agent as the authority harks back to Ben's status as an infant.

The protagonist continues criticizing authorial hypocrisy regarding artistic activity. He takes a group of writers as an example and exposes their veneer by contrasting their reactions in two distinct social situations: their talk on sacrosanct authorial inspiration addressed to students and their presence at an elegant dinner whereby they express an almost obsessive preoccupation with money. At the talk, the writers extol aesthetic sanctity, urging the young writers to view their engagement with art as a way of grappling with the "titans of form" (116). The fact that struggles and sufferings solely pertain to engagement with an abstract and intangible reality, reveals that they champion a decaying ideology in which artistic life is autonomous from the real. Since they preach the self-enclosed realm of writing's aesthetic qualities, they implicitly promote a hermitic withdrawal from the real world. The protagonist, by contrast, refuses to resort to transcendent experiences of artistic inspiration, preferring to give advice of "practical use" (109-110). In this way, he subtly shows that the other writers' advice belongs to a bygone era, especially given the economic difficulties of the literary field. At the elegant dinner, the ironic twist occurs when the discussion radically shifts and financial issues take precedence. By discussing their fellow colleagues' advances in a competitive spirit, the business-like ambience is exposed. The overt preoccupation with money on the part of the writers shows the extreme divergence between theory and practice. The protagonist debunks their deceitful nature in playing the mock

[35] By placing the writer in the web of social and institutional interrelations such as these of the agent and the editors, *10:04* subverts the notion of the authorial superhuman. Bourdieu has made similar claims in *The Rules of Art* to support the necessity of sociological analyses in literary studies.

ideologues. At the same time, he exposes their conservative side, as they cling to an ossified ideology regardless of whether they follow it in practice, or whether the revolutionary traits are applicable to the contemporary novelist.

Taking a cue from these writers, the author reveals that the entire professional writing business is staged, and operates in accordance to neoliberal ideas. The setting of the expensive dinner highlights that the value of the meeting is tied to its economic value. This connotes that the wealthier the dinner, the more prestigious the meeting. The author becomes the insider and the external observer at the same time, acting as a guide to the reader by explaining the roles of the participants. His excessive usage of the adjective "distinguished" ridicules the situation. The author mentions the "distinguished male author," who is examined as a case study of the neoliberal performer. Despite being validated through "international literary prizes," the male author strategically promotes his individual self through bodily and linguistic practices. The awards, albeit securing his literary validation, are symbolic and cannot be outwardly manifested. He adopts the kinesiological signal of "tugging at his salt-and-pepper beard" as a trademark, marking him as an idiosyncratic persona (117). By virtue of this distinctive tick, his body language marks his position in space. His linguistic volubility is an additional trait that makes him conspicuous and secures his presence among other writers. Additionally, the content of his monologue becomes a self-serving discourse that implicitly or explicitly favors him, such as stories of renowned friends and glorious personal victories (117). In this way, he markets himself by performing his status as an esteemed novelist. Along with personal boasting, his typical social performance includes expressing admiration for another writer's work in which standard phrases similar to lines from a script are employed. Lerner mocks these scripted interactions when the author is taken aback by the fact that a female author "actually read [his *New Yorker*] story" (118). This shows how the

performance of reading has become the convention and the actual familiarization with one's work the deviation.

In *10:04*, certain features that characterize the writer's role are also shared by "degraded," according to neoliberal standards, figures. The novel exposes the paradox of a society that both legitimizes and ostracizes the same trait by making it contingent upon the social role. For instance, the way the author preternaturally perceives reality, through estrangement from various objects or collapsing realities, is paralleled to drug users. Drug-induced supernatural experiences, such as the "flattening" of space, prove to be horrendous rather than ecstatic when experienced by other characters in the novel (189). The protagonist, however, achieves a similar effect as a poet and a flâneur of the city. The fact that poetry becomes a way of achieving the same effect as a narcotic, but without the toxicity, is a powerful defense of art. Besides, the writer's role, according to culturally embedded expectations, demands a perpetual state of ecstasy or creativity. Hence the paradox when the female author declares her outright lack of productivity, claiming that she works on "absolutely nothing" (119). This dearth of inspiration is at odds with the image of the writer as invariably drafting or expressing ideas even at a rudimentary level. This lack of work makes the condition of the author commensurable to the unemployed. The parallel is demonstrated through the regular meetings of the protagonist and his best friend at the Metropolitan Museum that take place "weekday afternoons, since Alex was unemployed, and [himself], a writer" (7). Since weekday afternoon is working time, both figures exist outside social time as defined by labor. Despite sharing a similar reality financially and in terms of labor, the writer instantiates the model of neoliberal freedom alone. In essence, even the traits of ecstasy and flexibility are stratified. On the one hand, they form part of a neoliberal ideal and on the other hand, they are indicative of figures placed at the nadir of the social ladder.

Theatricality in Form

Apart from revealing the character's distance from social roles, theatricality informs the novel's form through iterative patterns, as in the protagonist's effort to "copy" the actions of idolized figures like Whitman. In addition, the recurring motif of citation enters the formal structure of the novel either by inserting texts verbatim or by slightly tweaking them. Even when Lerner alters the texts, he ensures that the original is made clear to the reader. These mimetic practices show the fundamentally repetitive nature of language and life itself. The fact that his words appear as echoes of historical figures, exposes the theatrical iterability. At the same time, the novel troubles the idea of literature as a single-track linguistic medium by inserting images appropriated from other media. The insertion of cultural artifacts and historical documents grant the text a plagiaristic quality. Lerner seeks to reverse the idea of aesthetic compromise by creating a new style that hinges upon prior texts and media. The novel, therefore, is a formal metareflection on the idea of innovation. He revisits preexisting forms and works with them, stripping them from their previous context and rearranging them to fit the narrative. The author does not try to capture what Hannah Arendt has described as "pathos of novelty" (248), but rather the pathos of plagiarism or appropriation. Lerner approaches the Poundian philosophy of the "Make it New" dictum by revisiting older forms.

10:04's theatricality also manifests itself through the novel's fragmentary quality and the fact that it is not a self-contained narrative that arrives at a particular end-point. Samuel Weber contends that fragmentariness is a fundamentally theatrical quality because the very "*singularity of the theatrical event*" emerges through the "dislocations of its repetitions" (8). At the core of the theatrical event lies the fact that it is continually relocated to a different place. As such, it is spatially constrained solely for the duration of each performance. In this sense, the theatrical event may inhabit particular spaces but it cannot be restricted to them

because it is bound to eventually occur elsewhere. Theater, therefore, constitutes "a medium of displacement" that is not inclined "to arrive at a final destination" (Weber 30). *10:04* displays remarkably similar theatrical traits. The novel's aesthetically fractured form allows further additions or even removals, as we can see through Lerner's insertion of three distinct genres into the novel's structure: poetry, a short-story, and a children's science book. The *New Yorker* short-story and the children's science book, entitled "To the Future," were also stand-alone pieces published prior to the novel. Although the novel in its entirety forms a totality through their integration into the story,[36] these pieces can also function as individual windows to alternative genres. The flexibility in eliminating parts and the possibility of further addenda in the end indicate the novel's plasticity and radical open-endedness. Therefore, the form of *10:04* as a final product becomes an exaltation of the fragmentary rather than the whole. *10:04* cannot be characterized as a self-contained novel, because of the possibility of further stories and the fact that there is no closure in the ending. The novel's theatrical potential is located in its inability to fully arrive at a final destination.

The writer himself engages in formal games when his writing techniques raise readerly expectations and finally subvert them. The author ridicules the imperative to capture rare experiences when he expresses an intense feeling of absences: "I felt *acutely* aware that *nothing* slowly flashed across the sky, *no one* looked down on the city from above" (20 emphases mine). The protagonist points to his own inability as a writer to feel a unique or

[36] The novel organically inserts the three pieces in the narrative and even plays with the temporal distances between the stories in the chapters. As his *New Yorker* story becomes the second chapter, the author urges the reader to seek the autobiographical elements in the story. In the first chapter, he mentions which name would correspond to the respective character. For instance, "Alex would become Liza" or "Alena would become Hannah" (54). In this way, he helps the reader decode the clues by providing the "original" elements. The author reverses, however, the process of deriving clues from the original story. The first story that was crafted, which also precedes the novel temporally, is the published story in the *New Yorker*. The reader would be reasonably expected to solve the mystery based on clues from the *New Yorker* story. The way he structures the novel, though, by making this story the second chapter of the novel, shows that the clues need to be derived from the narrative that was produced afterwards, thus the first chapter.

special reality. This implicitly mocks the writers' need and the readers' demand from them to constantly perceive the extraordinary. At the same time, he makes even a moment of nothingness worthy of inclusion in the story. The reverse process takes place when the author makes a dramatic moment negligible. The way he derides sentimentalist descriptions begins by using the standard process of building rising action. In the phrase "the largest artery in my body would rupture at any moment," Lerner generates suspense while painting an image so hyperbolically grim that it ends up aestheticized: "I visualized … as a whipping hose spraying blood into my blood" (5). The scene climaxes with a rather cinematic shot in which the hero's breakdown is accompanied by "a far look … into [his] eyes" (5). This overt zoom on the protagonist's eyes encapsulates the magnitude of the moment, as death is lurking, and life becomes condensed, as if flashing before his eyes. Nevertheless, the apogee of sentimentalism in the scene deflates with the phrase "as though, etc." (5). The insertion of et cetera collapses all narratological expectations that have been aesthetically built and renders these profound moments prosaic, if not trite. This trope of deflation also appears when Ben jettisons the main idea of the novel regarding the fabrication of the archive. Although the project remains at the core of the novel, through discussions and the crafting of two letters, it is ultimately left incomplete. That the project evaporates subverts the cliché of developing the novel's original idea. Similarly, the author abstains from granting his novel the formal properties of a marketable book according to the agent, such as the development of "a clear, geometrical plot" or a "dramatic transformation" in the character (156). In turn, he creates a fragmentary plot and reveals the character's failure to undergo a life-altering transformation.

The subversion of the major narratological cliché of self-transformation dovetails with the character's inability to perform self-actualization due to the dysphoric distance from his roles. Ben finds himself inappropriate for the role of the parent, he feels that he cannot identify with the actions of the professor, and he acknowledges the exaggerations that the

writer's role permits. By stressing his continual failure and his distance from the roles, Ben indicates that the neoliberal "have-it-all," in which equilibrium needs to be crafted among these roles, cannot be achieved. Although he ostensibly complies with "most societal norms of functionality," Ben shows that falling within these categories does not mean that the role is adequately fulfilled. The way he describes his status as "employed (however lightly), sexually active (irresponsibly), socially embedded (if unmarried and childless)," resembles a tick-box approach (146). Nonetheless, the parentheses evince a degree of variation within every category and, thus, expose the inadequacy of similar bureaucratic forms of accounting. The author turns this dysphoric role distance to a form of self-parody, which mocks the imperative of self-actualization. His own self is based on his roles of parenthood, professorship, and authorship, which prove to be performative. If the artifice cannot be differentiated from the authentic, the concept of "self" and, by extension, the task of self-actualization prove to be in vain.

Community and Readers

Due to the distance felt from his social roles and the vanity of self-actualization processes, the writer turns to the reader as a last-ditch attempt to form a community. His desire for solidarity, chiefly evidenced in the metaphor of co-constructing (8, 11, 15), is eventually mediated by his self-interested practices. I agree with Theodore Martin's contention that *10:04* moves back and forth between the dialectic forces of "ideology and utopia" without managing to establish revolutionary practices (12). As Martin argues, the fact that the author seeks a political form of collectivity in a world "beyond capitalist profit" becomes "a parody of 'transpersonal revolutionary' politics … than an affirmation of such politics" (5). However, I depart from Martin's claim that the novel "sincerely wants" the revolutionary political forms of collectivity (12). Instead, I argue that these politics are intentionally parodied through theatricality. In addition, I contend that their failure does not

forestall the potential for alternative forms of being-with others. The author inspires different versions of the collective through artifice and linguistic play. The negation of reality, when one "discover[s] that [one is] not identical with [one's own] self" withholds, according to the author, "the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come" (109). As a result of the distance from his social roles, the author seeks an emotional, if refracted, way of being-with the world. One way of achieving this is through poetry, as in "the present tense of reading," a poem opens up "possibilities of feeling" (171). As the writer can write poetry and communicate his feelings through language, the reader becomes Ben's hope for the refracted creation of affect through the reading process. His relationship with the reader, thus, becomes symbiotic because the processes of writing and reading are interdependent in order for affect to be released. Poetry, therefore, operates as a form of theater because it is reconfigured as an affective social collectivity.

The author endeavors to capture the present in a way that keeps it perennially timely for its readers. He tries to establish the contemporary in the transitory affective networks or in realities that "flicker." This is precisely where the value of the contemporary lies according to Theodore Martin. Martin claims that the value of the contemporary is located "in the questions it raises about currency and immediacy: about the lures of the ephemeral and the experiential under a regime of late capitalism" (237). The "flickering" or transitory that characterizes the contemporary and the theatrical alike opens up the possibility to resist late capitalism.

The novel's unbounded circulation of emotional currency could be seen as complying with Rachel Greenwald Smith's "personal" novel that is in accordance with neoliberalism (11). Nonetheless, the novel performs on the one hand, its compliance as a self-compromised novel, and on the other hand, its self-consciousness as poioumenon: a type of metafiction in

which the narrative is about the process of literary creation.[37] This self-mocking acts as a constant reminder to the reader of *10:04*'s artificiality. Moreover, the suspension of disbelief that is a sine qua non in (auto)fiction, is partially negated through the coexistence of fact and paradox. The main character himself concedes that he moves along the lines of farce and seriousness by simultaneously claiming that "[he is] kidding and [he is] not kidding" (3). Besides, the possibility of affective revolution in the novel is predicated on the free circulation of feelings. The protagonist describes the potential of bodily affect to unite individuals into a collective whole: "my personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract that every atom belonging to me as good belonged to Noor, the fiction of the world rearranging itself around her" (109). The all-encompassing idea of "personhood" embraces the equality of affective networks. Affect's ability to circulate freely without being a property, demonstrates the possibility for revolution. In turn, the rearrangement of the theatrical world or the "fiction of the world" manifests that theatricality does not constitute an alterity in reality but is ingrained in it.

In the opening section, the author gives a preemptive nod to the reader regarding the performance that will follow. While walking with the agent on High Line, the author notices at some point a peculiar formation of the architectural structure as a "kind of amphitheater," the stage being a panoramic view of New York City (3). The "performance" that they watch, however, is the rather hackneyed spectacle of traffic. This movement, albeit artificial and monotonous, sparks the preternatural abilities of the author by attuning him to the city and rendering him hypersensitive to his own body. This indicates that even a seemingly prosaic performance can ignite all these unearthly reactions. The author invites the reader to watch

[37] The idea that metafictional or self-conscious novels "perform" their self-reflexiveness is shared by both John Barth and Brian Stonehill. Their difference lies in that Barth postulates that only postmodernist fiction "performs" the "self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy" (200). In contrast, Stonehill claims that every self-conscious novel "dramatizes and encapsulates its own context" (5)

this performance through his eyes because of his ability to endow the reader's experience with the beauty of the mundane. The author can perform and concurrently direct the experience as a play. Similar to the oft-quoted Whitman, the protagonist positions himself on the one hand, as a poet of the city or an urban transcendentalist, and on the other hand, as a poet of the body, affect, and perceptions. The city, therefore, becomes his stage and the author becomes the performer and director.

The theatricality with which he endows the city space rectifies the narrator's prior self-centered attitudes, because he attempts a form of community. At the outset, his supernatural estrangement from his body and perception of affects takes place in a solipsistic vein as the "proprioceptive flicker [comes] in advance of the communal body" (28, 108). Nonetheless, the possibility of the political comes with the inclusion of more "flickering presences" that actually become the communal body. Near the end of the novel, the selfish gaze of his disembodied persona is reconfigured as he includes more people that hover above Manhattan and inspect the city. These figures become both protagonists and observers at the same time (238-239). The image of buildings as "two-dimensional, like cardboard cutouts in a stagecraft foreground" accentuates New York's status as stage (139). The stage is solely enlivened, however, by its citizens. Although the floating bodies are portrayed as corpses, the author transforms this perverse image of the (hope for) community into an image of beauty. In this sense, the futurity negated by death is restored through his novel as a work of art.

The author seeks to persuade the reader that he has converted the novel from a conveyor of symbolic and economic capital for the publishing houses, to a conveyor of meaning and affect. The subordination of economic profits to affective ties happens when the author denies the novel's existence as a product of unique self-expression, and renders it a cordial offer to the reader instead: "the novel … I've written … for you, to you, on the very

edge of fiction" (237). The deictic "to you" as well as the gift-offering quality of "for you" index the writer's affective labor to satisfy the reader and, thus, to efface the novel's commodity status. The writer literally breaks the fourth wall by addressing the reader directly and inserting his brief appearance on TV to show his tangibility: "maybe you saw me" (234-235). *10:04* gradually and strategically reveals its compromising nature to explain the rationale behind this decision. Through the various descriptions regarding what the novel *is* or the gist of what the author intends to write, the reader is directed to specific themes that the writer wants to emphasize.

> "I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor non-fiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures." (194)

This deliberate strategy along with the fact that he strays from his original topic for the reader seeks to encourage an empathetic stance towards the writer and the book. Akin to a child that flouts the rules, the protagonist portrays a hero that defies the social contract to remain true to his readers. Furthermore, the ambivalent and multidimensional temporal marker of the present, both grammatically and adverbially ("the book you're reading now"), is adapted according to each individual reader.

In addition, by drawing attention to his changed story, the author lays emphasis on the fact that the purpose of his initial novel would not be clearly defined between commerce and art. According to the author, "even at the novel's end," the reader would be clueless regarding the protagonist's final action to "sell the letters" or turn it into "an epistolary novel" instead (119). The unclear boundaries between a profitable commodity and an artistic creation attest to the ambiguous purpose of the previous novel, resulting in his decision to discard it. Unlike

Amy in *Gone Girl*, who retains her fabricated diary to deliberately trick the reader, Ben abandons the project to seek a better alternative for the reader. Besides, the fact that he follows Alex's suggestion to "inhabit the present" instead of faking the past shows that he takes his readers into serious consideration (137). The protagonist actively exhibits his confidence in contemporary mass readership. He abstains from following the lingering ideal of modernist writers for whom an artistic work produced according to the demands of mass market foregoes aesthetic quality. By appealing to a mass readership rather than an oligopolistic elite market, the author promotes his faith to the current readers as he recognizes their potential to value the aesthetic qualities of his writing. Therefore, despite Juliet Lapidos' critique of *10:04* as gimmicky, or a production of "laziness," *10:04*'s self-conscious play with its commodification and compromise transforms institutional practice into play for the reader.

In *10:04*'s closing section, Lerner employs the theatrical technique of speech to show that his alternative vista of community is structured around theatricality. The usage of speech evinces the contradiction that is belied in seeking the possibility of community and satirizing this process at the same time. By patterning his speech on the format of Reagan's presidential address, like tracing a drawing, the author attempts to transmute an everyday moment into a historical one. He inserts the banal trajectory of himself and Alex to underline that the personal can become historical, and uses the future tense to aesthetically indicate it. Lerner takes heed of potential figures of optimism, even in "bad forms of collectivity," because for him, the "process of exploration and discovery" primarily pertains to an immortal community (239). His vision, thus, eradicates all forms of boundaries. The connotations of an affective plea for community differentiate his perspective from Reagan's. For the latter, the way to expand beyond the limits of the human lies in scientific knowledge and progress. Nationalist

undertones are, therefore, retained because the country implicitly takes credit for supporting a scientific mission.

10:04 encapsulates the hope for futurity through Ben's consolatory power and theatricality's potential to counter neoliberalism. The final paragraph encapsulates the author's support to all readers. The author acknowledges the environmental precarity of "the seas [being] poisoned and the superstorm [having] shut down all the ports" as well as the pervasiveness of neoliberal western thinking that advocates "the merits of condos and co-ops" (240). The alternation of perspectives from the third person during the walk, to the first person "at the time of writing," and finally to the second person plural indicates all the different perspectives a writer needs to adopt in order to attune to the city. Thus, the writer needs to be in proximity with the city and at a distance from it to perceive its totality. Besides, the use of the present continuous tense instead of the future tense when he is "looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural" while writing, shows that due to his all-encompassing gaze, his art epitomizes community's perennial present (240).

His final reassuring words render the author a figure of consolation in precarious communities by virtue of theatricality. The words "I know it's hard to understand/I am with you, and I know how it is" become the author's plea to a phantom community that includes non-present readers, or prospective citizens such as his child. The author provides solace by reciting the words of others, as these phrases are appropriated from Reagan and Whitman respectively. This consolidates the idea that solely through the theatrical element can he make an impactful change in a precarious world. This process resembles the potential of a ritual in

a community,[38] countering Maggie Doherty's assertion that novels merging experimentalism and market concerns are the opium of the readers.

The affective and consolatory power of Ben to the reader is extended by delivering the promise of futurity with the child. As Alex is pregnant in the end, the novel opens up a new space of hope for the future through the advent of the baby. Contrary to *Gone Girl*, in which the baby seals a nihilistic present reality and futurity, *10:04* retains an optimistic undertone despite the precarious present, because of Ben's work toward an affective community. In addition, the "artificial" process of reproduction gives the optimism for a future sans the imperative of authenticity.

[38] Victor Turner claims that a ritual succeeds in retaining "the apartness and openness of the non-serious" and concurrently making "a difference in the world of the everyday" (Loxley 156).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have elucidated my theoretical approach to theatricality with reference to twenty-first-century literature. Contrary to Roland Barthes's definition of theatricality as "theater-minus-text" (26), I contend that text becomes a productive space with which to examine it. Since the term eludes systematic theorization as an approach to contemporary literature, I have structured my definition on the consciousness of one's own presentation in social roles. As I have argued, the narratives in this study call attention to the performative structure of everyday life through self-display and repetitive structures in language. Moreover, I have situated the intertwining of theatricality, textuality, and introspection in the novels. In this way, my argument substantiates Mark McGurl's contention that an individual in the contemporary cultural context is bound to "feel a 'compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging' of a biography and … the obsessive 'reading' of that biography even as it's being written" (12-13). In an increasingly theatricalized and self-reflective era, I endeavor to open a theoretical space for the fruitful merging of the theatrical, textual, and reflective.

I have argued that the theatrical is entrenched in reality despite initially appearing as a breach with it. In *10:04*, theatricality demonstrates the distance between the character and the roles he enacts in an exaggerated manner. In *Gone Girl*, marital dysfunction becomes a relentlessly savage theatrical game. The game's extreme theatricality appears as distinct from real life because the couple engages in self-conscious performances. Although the two novels do not share a common mode of articulating theatricality, they both portray the theatrical processes involved in performing social roles when the characters experience a separation from their respective roles. This distance critiques the structural dimension of the roles. As Amy, Nick, and Ben reflect on and evaluate their actions, they become self-dramatizing characters. As I argue, Amy and Nick experience a euphoric role distance because their

separation from their roles is intentional, with a view to prevailing in the marital game. Following approaches of analysis from IM, I contend that the couple succeeds in distorting reality and manipulating the audience by availing themselves of the roles' prescribed patterns. Conversely, Ben experiences a dysphoric role distance because he grudgingly distances himself from the role. His separation attributed to his anxiety towards institutional expectations and fluctuating performances, parodies both the self in his prescribed social role, and the role itself. This parody is further complicated by the conflation of Ben Lerner and his main character avatar.

Although I have employed theatrical processes to challenge the traditional conventions of roles in both texts, I have delineated two conflicting versions of theatricality against a neoliberal backdrop to demonstrate that the term is not imbued with an intrinsically ethical meaning. In *Gone Girl*, the central characters are imprisoned to an enduring performance of idealized social roles. Although in the beginning theatrical domesticity ensures the entrapment of male characters alone, the fact that theatrical strategies are used as part of a competitive power game, reinforces the overarching tyranny of neoliberalism. Theatricality in *Gone Girl* operates at the cross-section of critique of social roles and conformity to neoliberal practices. In *10:04*, I claim that the author uses theatricality to inspire different versions of the collective in an attempt to resist and challenge his self-centered neoliberal practices. As the writer derides his own attempts to engage in revolutionary politics, he turns to theatricality as an alternative way of interacting with others. Ben situates his hope in the transitory affective realities, and inserts theatrical elements to capture these realities and establish a form of community. The linguistic potential of theatricality is celebrated in my argument for the appeal to this community.

According to the different theatrical modes, I have argued for two distinct versions of kinship and futurity. The novels present a vision of reproductive futurity, or futurity through

children. Despite Ben's profound insecurity as a prospective parent, he becomes a figure of consolation to an imaginary community by the close of the novel. Due to Ben's consolatory power, *10:04* invokes a hopeful future despite his precarious present. The child's advent in *10:04* is associated with the normative idea that the child constitutes an optimistic future. However, *Gone Girl* radically departs from this utopian image. The blatantly grotesque and theatrical marital relation constrains the actions of the parents. The baby becomes a terrifying prospect because of the perpetuation of idealized social roles and neoliberal family values. *Gone Girl* paints a grim picture because the child is conceived by immoral means, as part of Amy's tactic to win the competition.

Ultimately, through the compromising authorial figures, the novels foreground a changing reality in the writer's role. *10:04*, as a novel solicited by the publishing market, and *Gone Girl*, which makes writing part of a competition, display the triumph of the market. Artistic compromises and financial considerations in writing are contrasted with a typical modernist ideal centered on non-market aspirations. The texts, however, are afforded critical power to comment on the structure of deep-seated societal norms, thus disproving the argument that commercial success equals an aesthetically and politically compromising gesture.

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